

The Triumph of Continuity

The Christian Democrats, West German Ostpolitik and the Cold War

Mirco Reimer-Elster

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to
obtaining the degree of Doctor of History and Civilisation
of the European University Institute

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European University Institute
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THE TRIUMPH OF CONTINUITY

For my mother (1965-2022)

Abstract

After thirteen long years in opposition, the West German Christian Democrats returned to power in the fall of 1982. At the time, it was widely discussed whether a turn in relations with Eastern Europe had to be expected since the Christian Democrats had been staunch opponents of Willy Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*. Today, there is a scholarly consensus that a change did not occur. Consequently, this thesis addresses the questions when, why, and how did the West German Christian Democrats (namely the CDU and the CSU), cross the ostpolitikal Rubicon?

The thesis highlights the various developments and changes that influenced the conduct of *Ostpolitik* from 1969-1983, and particularly from 1974-1983, over the course of four chapters. The main argument is that *Ostpolitik* had become a national policy by the mid- to late-1970s, once the Christian Democrats finally had accepted the premise of the Eastern Treaties as the foundation for West German foreign policy. While there still were strands within the CDU, and especially within the CSU, that voiced their criticism and demanded an ostpolitikal turnaround, these strands constituted a vocal minority.

In the best outcome, Willy Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* was complementary to Konrad Adenauer's *Westbindung*. Finding the right balance between these two cornerstones of West German foreign policy was a delicate balancing act throughout the Cold War. Whereas the balancing act was managed with remarkable success during Brandt's chancellorship and initially also under his successor Helmut Schmidt, the international climate changed significantly during the late 1970s, which necessitated rethinking the balance between *Westbindung* and *Ostpolitik*. Ultimately, a leftwards drift among the West German Social Democrats opened the door for the Christian Democrats to return to power, with the liberal party FDP being the harbinger of stability.

The turn in the fall of 1982 was therefore a return where change facilitated continuity.

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For a long time, I had given up on finishing this thesis. Years went by where personal circumstances and a worldwide pandemic kept me from writing. When I arrived at the EUI, I had recently married and had one child. Seven years later, my mother had died, merely 56 years old, after a courageous fight against cancer. Also, I am now the father of four children, including twins. When I talked to my supervisor again in the spring of 2023, years had passed since I had worked on the thesis. I decided to give it one last attempt. Having already written the bulk of the thesis, it felt like a massive personal failure not to finish the job. At the same time, I had to be realistic: I had no funding anymore and was working fulltime outside of academia to provide for my family.

Writing these acknowledgements thus feels like the biggest professional success I have ever had. Going from being raised by a single mother, who had to work two jobs in a supermarket and at a gas station to provide for us, to now finishing a PhD is unbelievable. At the same time, I could not have finished the job without the invaluable support of a lot of people and institutions along the long way, who I want to thank wholeheartedly.

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No artificial intelligence has been used during the development of this thesis, although some might argue that it would have improved the thesis a great deal. All shortcomings are, of course, entirely mine.

Abbreviations

CDU Christlich Demokratische Union, Christian Democratic Union

CSU Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern, Christian Social Union of Bavaria

FDP Freie Demokratische Partei, Free Democratic Party

FRG Federal Republic of Germany

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

SDI Strategic Defense Initiative

SED Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Socialist Unity Party of Germany

SPD Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Social Democratic Party

Introduction: What's in a name?

“The fact that it took almost a decade for the new transfer of power to take shape was due to the Union's immobility. The FDP was only able to reorient itself when (the Union) jumped over its ostpolitikal shadow.”

- Willy Brandt¹

Thirty years ago, in 1993, the Oxford historian Timothy Garton Ash observed in his classic account “In Europe’s name”:

“It is no accident that Ostpolitik is one of relatively few German words to be used in the English language, alongside Weltanschauung, Angst and Schadenfreude. For if one examines the policies of the major Western powers towards Eastern Europe over the twenty years from 1969 to 1989, one soon finds that the policy of the Federal Republic was the most consistent, the most extensive and the most intensive.”²

Nowadays, in the aftermath of Russia’s attack and ongoing war against Ukraine, the *Neue Ostpolitik* has come under oftentimes harsh - and ahistorical – criticism, revisionism, and revaluation. Within eight years, the dominant view appears to have gone from “what would Willy Brandt do?” in the aftermath of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 to an event held at the Willy Brandt Foundation in August 2022 - six months into Russia’s attack on Ukraine - entitled “The (again) controversial legacy of Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik”.³

Simultaneously, calls for a new *Ostpolitik* have become ever more common. For example, aforementioned Garton Ash argued “Germany is in urgent need of a courageous new Ostpolitik” less than two weeks before Russia’s attack on Ukraine in February 2022, stressing that “Russia and China today pose very different challenges from those faced by Willy Brandt in the

¹ Willy Brandt, *Erinnerungen* (Düsseldorf: Schröder, 1989), 301.

² Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe’s Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 14.

³ Peter Dausend and Michael Thumann, *Was würde Willy Brandt tun?* (Die Zeit, 28.11.2014): <https://www.zeit.de/2014/49/ostpolitik-deutschland-europa-russland-wladimir-putin> (accessed 5.6.23) Link to the 2022-event: <https://willy-brandt.de/ausstellungen/veranstaltungen/das-wieder-umstrittene-erbe-von-willy-brandts-ostpolitik/> (accessed 5.6.23)

1970s.”⁴ Six months earlier, in August 2021, the now-German chancellor Olaf Scholz said “what we need is a new Ostpolitik that strengthens this idea of the CSCE and OSCE again.”⁵ Two months later, Scholz expanded on this in a tweet, proclaiming: “Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik was a liberating change. German reunification & the unity of Europe would have been unthinkable without #WillyBrandt. 50 years ago he received the #NobelPeacePrize for it. The following applies to us today: we need a new Ostpolitik, a European one.”⁶

It seems thus fair to say, then, that the legacies of *Ostpolitik* are still with us today and very much shape our understanding of German foreign policy to this day.⁷ Indeed, as Werner Lippert already argued more than a decade ago: “It is clear, however, that Brandt’s Ostpolitik had a major economic component that not only made Ostpolitik possible but also created a rift between the Federal Republic and the United States that was to persist through the Cold War and beyond.”⁸

This thesis, however, does neither judge nor evaluate the historical legacy of *Ostpolitik* amidst the backdrop of tragic contemporary events, well knowing that this kind of reading history backwards has been pronounced in recent years.⁹ “This is history as allegory, the view of the past as primarily a resource on which to draw to meet the social and psychological needs of the present”, as the columnist Kenan Malik has put it recently.¹⁰

⁴ Timothy Garton Ash, *Germany is in urgent need of a courageous new Ostpolitik* (Financial Times, 9.2.2022): <https://www.ft.com/content/4d9b6d06-848e-4060-a4a0-a9a700e28bd9> (accessed 5.6.23). Similar criticism had also been voiced a decade ago by Hans Kundnani, who had lamented that “the Ostpolitik illusion” was no sensible way to approach foreign relations in the 21st century”. Similarly, Jan Behrend’s criticized the “Mythos Ostpolitik”. See more Hans Kundnani, *Die Ostpolitik-Illusion* (Internationale Politik, 18.12.2013): <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/die-ostpolitik-illusion> (accessed 4.6.2023) and Jan Behrends, *Mythos Ostpolitik* (Die Zeit, 12.12.2014): <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2014-12/russland-deutschland-mythos-ostpolitik/komplettansicht> (accessed 10.6.2023).

⁵ Manuela Kasper-Claridge and Jaafar Abdul Karim. Scholz: "Hier gilt die Herrschaft des Rechts" (Deutsche Welle, 11.8. 2021): <https://www.dw.com/de/olaf-scholz-hier-gilt-die-herrschaft-des-rechts-und-nicht-das-recht-des-st%C3%A4rkeren/a-58832751> (accessed 5.6.23).

⁶ Olaf Scholz tweet on October 20th, 2021: <https://twitter.com/OlafScholz/status/1450767138332024833?s=20> (accessed 5.6.23).

⁷ Another recent example is Hans-Joachim Gießmann, Peter Brandt and Götz Neuneck (editors) »... aber eine Chance haben wir« *Zum 100. Geburtstag von Egon Bahr* (Bonn: Dietz, 2022).

⁸ Werner Lippert in Matthias Schulz and Thomas Alan Schwartz (eds.), *The Strained Alliance: U.S.-European Relations from Nixon to Carter* (Washington, D.C.: Publications of the German Historical Institute, 2010), 81.

⁹ For an articulate critique of these tendencies, see the introduction in Poul Villaume, *Mellem Frygt og Håb* (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2023).

¹⁰ Kenan was writing about the ongoing debate about the colour of Cleopatra’s skin but the mechanisms at work here appear to be similar. See more: Malik, Kenan, *When Cleopatra was alive, she wasn’t categorized by the colour of her skin* (The Guardian, 23.4.2023): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/23/when-cleopatra-was-alive-she-wasnt-categorised-by-colour-of-her-skin> (accessed 4.6.2023).

Ostpolitik Revisited

The thesis does also not offer suggestions as to whether the foundations for the subsequent praise or criticism of post-Cold War German foreign policy towards Russia has been well placed. Rather, this thesis agrees with the argument put forward by Caroline Fink and Bernd Schaefer two decades ago that “not everyone then, or now, applauds the ethos and practice of *Ostpolitik*, but no one can deny its impact on German, European, and world history.”¹¹ Therefore, this thesis primarily is an attempt to shed more light on a question that long has been neglected in the historiography: when, why, and how did the West German Christian Democrats (namely the CDU and the CSU), cross the *ostpolitikal* Rubicon?

After thirteen long years in opposition, the Christian Democrats returned to power in the fall of 1982. At the time, it was widely discussed whether a change in relations with Eastern Europe had to be expected since the Union for years had been staunch opponents of the *Neue Ostpolitik*.¹² Today, there is however a scholarly consensus that such a change did not occur.¹³² As Marie-Louise Recker has observed: “With regards to foreign policy and West-German-GDR relations, the “turn” (*Wende*) from 1982 was initially hardly noticeable.”¹⁴³

How the Christian Democrats arrived at this point, has so far not been addressed adequately in the literature. In general, it is striking how little the historiography on *Ostpolitik*, and *détente* deals with the Christian Democrats - who after all were in power for longer time during the Cold War than the social democratic SPD - and for that matter also regarding the liberal party FDP, who was the only West German political party in government throughout the entire era of *Ostpolitik* from 1969-1989. A recent exception to the rule is Marco Gerhard Schinze-Gerber’s biography of Franz-Josef Strauß, who also highlights the lack of historical studies, but naturally centres around a single personality.¹⁵

¹¹ Carole Fink and Bernd Schaefer, *Ostpolitik, 1969-1974: European and Global Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹² Clay Clemens, *Reluctant Realists: The Christian Democrats and West German Ostpolitik* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989).

¹³ Stefan, Kreuzberger, *Westintegration und Neue Ostpolitik: Die Außenpolitik der Bonner Republik* (Berlin: Bebra Verlag, 2014); Gregor Schöllgen, *Deutsche Außenpolitik – von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2013). Marie-Luise, Recker, *Geschichte Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (München, C. H. Beck, 2009).

¹⁴ Recker, 88.

¹⁵ Marco Gerhard Schinze-Gerber, *Franz Josef Strauß* (Georg Olms Verlag AG. Kindle Edition, 2020), 25.

Likewise, despite major academic discussion on West German foreign policy throughout the 1980s, the academic focus on the development of the Kohl administration's *Ostpolitik* and détente policies is still sporadic.¹⁶ Recent studies have for example examined the diplomacy of détente by stressing the role of Helmut Schmidt and George Shultz, but barely mention Kohl and the Christian Democrats.¹⁷ Ironically, more studies seem to exist about the SPD's attempt to create a second – and de facto shadow foreign policy – *Ostpolitik* while in opposition in the 1980s than of the policies of the actual government in charge at the time.¹⁸ The exception is West Germany's policy towards the GDR, which belongs "to the comparatively very well researched matters of the German history of this period."¹⁹

Clay Clemens' "Reluctant Realists: The CDU/CSU and West German Ostpolitik" is the exception to the rule and remains a classic.²⁰ Clemens did, however, mainly study the Union's development during its period in opposition from 1969-1982. Only a concluding section in Clemens' book dealt with events since 1982. Furthermore, Clemens finished his study in 1989 and had hitherto not the chance to consult the German archives to document how the Christian Democrats went from fierce antagonism to accommodation and the growing acceptance of the necessity for rapprochement throughout the long 1970s. Apart from Clemens, Gerhard Wettig wrote an article in 2010 on the changing concepts of 'Neue Ostpolitik' in the 1980s but devoted only ten pages to the subject.²¹ The same goes for Katarzyna Stoklos' "Polen und die deutsche Ostpolitik 1945-1990", which had a brief chapter on the continuation of *Neue Ostpolitik* under Helmut Kohl.²²

¹⁶ For example, there is very little on the topic in one of the best accounts of the short 1980s: Andreas Wirsching, *Abschied vom Provisorium: Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1982-1990* (München: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 2006).

¹⁷ Stephan Kieninger, *The Diplomacy of Détente: Cooperative Security Policies from Helmut Schmidt to George Shultz* (London: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2018).

¹⁸ Jan Hansen, *Abschied Vom Kalten Krieg?* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG., 2016) and Stefan Kreuzberger, *Willy Brandt und Michail Gorbatschow: Bemühungen um eine zweite »neue Ostpolitik«, 1985-1990* (Berlin: Bebra Verlag, 2014).

¹⁹ Wirsching, 801. Examples are Matthias Zimmer, *Nationales Interesse und Staatsräson: zur Deutschlandpolitik der Regierung Kohl, 1982-1989* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1992); Karl-Rudolf Korte, *Deutschlandpolitik in Helmut Kohls Kanzlerschaft: Regierungsstil Und Entscheidungen 1982-1989* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1998) and Heinrich Potthoff, *Im Schatten Der Mauer: Deutschlandpolitik 1961 Bis 1990* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1999).

²⁰ Clay Clemens, *Reluctant Realists: The Christian Democrats and West German Ostpolitik* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989).

²¹ Gerhard Wettig, Die „neue Ostpolitik“ der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und die Veränderungen dieses Konzepts in den achtziger Jahren (*Forum für osteuropäische Ideen -und Zeitgeschichte*, Volume 14, Issue 1, 2010), 31–40.

²² Katarzyna Stoklos, *Polen und die deutsche Ostpolitik 1945-1990* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

The limited attention paid to the Kohl administration's eastern policy is surprising given its alleged European and global importance in ending the Cold War. As Fink and Schäfer have highlighted, the policy redefined not only "Germany's relation with its Nazi past but also altered the global environment of the Cold War."²³ Likewise, Ronald Granieri has argued: "Europe was spared the proxy wars and superpower-backed coups that afflicted other regions of the world during the 1970s and early 1980s. That was in no small measure a result of détente and Ostpolitik. With the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe's Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the two blocs committed themselves to peaceful coexistence at least within Europe."²⁴ In addition, since West Germans consider the *Neue Ostpolitik* a, if not the, crucial component that brought about the end of Cold War – while former East German civil rights activists believe that *Ostpolitik* extended the Cold War - it seems paramount to examine on what basis Helmut Kohl and his conservative colleagues opted to pursue their version of *Ostpolitik*.²⁵

The thesis is primarily based on archival research in German ministerial and party archives, spanning the timeframe from 1974-1983 in the form of records of meetings, correspondences, press statements, etc. In addition, the „*Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*“ and the “*Berichte zur Lage*”-protocols of CDU-leadership meetings have been vital for this project. To a lesser extent, materials from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California and memoirs of leading German decisionmakers have been included as well. Speaking of these, many of the most prolific politicians of the era died during the work on this thesis. To mention but a few: Egon Bahr, Helmut Schmidt, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Helmut Kohl, George Shultz, George H. W. Bush, Valentin Falin, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski. Indeed, Henry Kissinger appears to be the one who outlives them (almost) all.

Speaking of longevity, the same can be said about the underlying debates in Germany regarding *Ostpolitik*. As the German political scientist Thomas Oppelland noted decades ago in his study of the Christian Democratic foreign minister Gerhard Schröder: “The principal positions in this especially in Germany very party politically dominated debate (have) barely changed.”²⁶ Andreas Grau from the conservative Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung had a similar assessment some years later

²³ Fink and Schafer (eds.), *Ostpolitik*.

²⁴ Ronald Granieri in Schulz and Schwartz (eds.), 63-64.

²⁵ According to Stephen F. Szabo, *Parting Ways: The Crisis in German-American Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2004) a large majority credit `Neue Ostpolitik`, détente, and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, while only a tiny minority credited Ronald Reagan's policies.

²⁶ Torsten Oppelland, *Gerhard Schroeder (1910-1989): Politik zwischen Staat, Partei und Konfession* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2002), 757 footnote 257.

stressing “The CDU/CSU opposition’s criticism of the East and Germany policy of the Social-Liberal coalition is usually met with little understanding.”²⁷ While this appears to be a fair criticism when looking at the existing literature, it also has to be highlighted that conservative institutions in Germany like the Konrad Adenauer Foundation have excelled in apparent party political exercises lately with the edited volume “*Entspannung im Kalten Krieg*”. As one reviewer, Susanne Schattenberg from the University of Bremen, cautioned: “The suspicion quickly creeps up on you that this is less about newly accessible sources from the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI) and more about nothing less than the reevaluation of history.”²⁸

Indeed, the idea, often pronounced by conservatives, that “Ostpolitik was neither new nor Brandt's idea, but a somewhat impetuous, clumsy continuation of Adenauer's well-considered, level-headed strategy”, as Schattenberg critically has summarized the essence of the argument, is still alive 50 years later.²⁹ At the same time, however, it also important to stress, that there generally has been an acknowledgement in the historiography that the CDU/CSU oftentimes shared the same ostpolitikal goals than the Social-Liberal government, while rejecting its methods.³⁰

The thesis does also not take sides in the binary debate whether it was *Ostpolitik*, détente and Mikhail Gorbachev`s new thinking or Ronald Reagan, a rejection of détente, “peace through strength” and the dual track decision that brought about the end of the Cold War. As often the case, the answer probably lies somewhere in between, not least with the role of ordinary people and human rights activists in the Eastern Bloc, and more factors need to be accounted for, as Fritz Bartel demonstrates in his masterful “The Triumph of Broken Promises”.³¹ Indeed, as Wilfried von Bredow has stressed: “From today's perspective, however, it is not at all easy to decide whether certain developments in the East-West conflict, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet camp and

²⁷ Andreas Grau, *Gegen den Strom. Die Reaktion der CDU/CSU-Opposition auf die Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik der sozialliberalen Koalition 1969-1973* (Düsseldorf, Droste Verlag, 2005), 507.

²⁸ Susanne Schattenberg, Rezension zu: Borchard, Michael; Karner, Stefan; Küsters, Hanns Jürgen; Ruggenthaler, Peter (Hrsg.): *Entspannung im Kalten Krieg. Der Weg zum Moskauer Vertrag und zur KSZE. Graz 2021* in H-Soz-Kult, 03.06.2021“: <https://www.hsozkult.de/review/id/reb-50759?title=m-borchard-u-a-hrsg-entspannung-im-kalten-krieg> (accessed 5.6.23)

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Grau, 506-507.

³¹ Fritz Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises. The End of the Cold War and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (Harvard University Press, 2022).

the USSR itself, were mainly or partly because of the policy of detente, despite the policy of detente, or occurred independently from her.³²

The thesis does however challenge the oftentimes very linear and almost teleological view of West German *Ostpolitik*, where 1969 led to 1989, and one political side allegedly was right while the other was wrong. To mention but one example, the former SPD-chef Siegmund Gabriel hailed Egon Bahr as “the architect of reunification” after Bahr’s death in August 2015.³³ In the years since the end of the Cold War, Egon Bahr himself had also claimed that the idea of ‘change through rapprochement’ “had worked.”³⁴ Manfred Uschner, a former member of the SED and confidante of Egon Bahr, similarly proclaimed: “November 9th 1989 was a day of triumph for the Ostpolitik of the German social democrats.”³⁵

As the German historian Eckart Conze cautioned in 2011, the teleological debates about which influence *Ostpolitik* had on the end of the Cold War and unification is the “wrong question asked”.³⁶ Conze continued: “Whether Konrad Adenauer or Willy Brandt ultimately contributed more to making reunification possible is not only a fairly simple question, but also one that is historically entirely inappropriate, even ahistorical.”³⁷ The powerful social democrat Wolfgang Schmidt agreed: “I think this reminder and the statement that there was no straight path from 1969 to 1989 is fully justified and important.”³⁸ Schmidt also argued that it was important to differentiate between *Ostpolitik* before and after the Eastern Treaties.³⁹

Thesis Outline

Consequently, the ambition of this thesis is to highlight the various developments and changes that influenced the conduct of *Ostpolitik* from 1969-1983, and particularly from 1974-1983. Therefore, the thesis’ four chapters progress chronologically.

³² Wilfried Von Bredow in Bernd Rother (eds), *Willy Brandt. Neue Fragen, neue Erkenntnisse* (Dietz, 2011), 155. The exception for him is the Helsinki Final Act with its basket 3.

³³ *SPD-Politiker Egon Bahr gestorben* (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, August 20th 2015): <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/architekt-der-ostpolitik-spd-politiker-egon-bahr-gestorben-13759543.html> (accessed 5.6.23)

³⁴ Manfred Uschner, *Die Ostpolitik der SPD. Sieg und Niederlage einer Strategie* (Berlin, Dietz, 1991) p. 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁶ Eckart Conze in Rother (eds.), *Brandt*, 112.

³⁷ Conze in Rother (eds.), *Brandt*, 112.

³⁸ Wolfgang Schmidt in Rother (eds.), *Brandt*, 157.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

Chapter one provides a conception of the *Neue Ostpolitik* and contextualizes the policy within the overall context of post-war German and international politics in the evolving Cold War. Three key questions are addressed throughout the chapter. First, how was the *Neue Ostpolitik* conceptualized by its main protagonists Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr? Second, why did the policy become a political priority in the 1960s? And third, how was the *Neue Ostpolitik* received by the Cold War's main protagonists in both East and West? The chapter underlines that a changing domestic and international environment made détente a more desired and plausible endeavour by the late 1960s, where ideas of an East-West détente had become mainstream in many leading Western nations. The *Neue Ostpolitik* was thus part of a wider development throughout the 1960s that simultaneously had seen the stabilization of the two blocs and a spreading perception of their permanence. At the same time, *Ostpolitik* and détente did of course not blow away the ideological underpinnings of the Cold War. Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* did however serve as the initial treaty phase in the era of *Ostpolitik* and laid the foundations for institutionalization of the West German version of détente when Brandt left office in 1974.

Chapter two describes how *Ostpolitik* entered adulthood under Helmut Schmidt and Hans-Dietrich Genscher from 1974-1982. The challenges Brandt's successors were facing were profoundly different and more complicated than the ones Brandt had faced. While Brandt was able to ride the détente wave that had reached the European shores by the mid-1960s, Schmidt and his new foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher had to recalibrate *Ostpolitik* and approach Brandt's signature policy with a different mindset amidst the deterioration of détente. The new government came to power amidst the further transformation of the international and domestic environment, the global repercussions of the Yom Kippur War and the oil crisis, which made the task even more daunting. It also set its mark on *Ostpolitik*, which now had to be understood more in security and economic terms than it had been the case under Brandt.⁴⁰ This development further complicated things for Schmidt and Genscher and contrary to the Brandt era the ostpolitikal manoeuvre room decreased significantly for Schmidt and Genscher. Rather ironically it was thus during Schmidt's chancellorship that the Federal Republic both "came of age on the global stage" (Kristina Spohr)

⁴⁰ See for example Stephan Kieninger, *Diplomacy beyond deterrence: Helmut Schmidt and the economic dimension of Ostpolitik*, *Cold War History*, 20:2 (2020), 179-196.

while at the same time, in the historian Frank Fischer's memorable phrase, "Ostpolitik faded into a nostalgic reminiscence", and détente became multilateralized in forums such as the CSCE.⁴¹

Chapter three charts the development within the Christian Democrats towards ostpolitikal rapprochement during the long 1970s (1969-1982), where the Union was in parliamentary opposition.⁴² The primary emphasis is on the years from the mid-1970s and onwards - after the ratification of the Eastern Treaties - until the CDU/CSU's return to power in October 1982. The Union's rapprochement towards a policy of cooperation was arguably as much driven by electoral disappointments as domestic and international developments. This evolution basically unfolded in two parts. Initially, the Christian Democrats thought that opposition to Brandt's version of *Ostpolitik* – which, it is imperative to underline, was based on deeply rooted political beliefs - was a winning issue in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the dominant Union view, the Brandt-Scheel government would only be a brief interlude to the Christian Democrats reign. During the chancellorship of Helmut Schmidt, the Union then came to the politically painful realization that *Ostpolitik* had been lost as a political issue and thus had to be neutralized as an electoral element. Simultaneously, the Union came to terms with that *Ostpolitik* had become institutionalized both domestically and internationally. This "ambivalent adaption", as Clay Clemens has aptly labelled it, was long and paved with intra-party infights, but it was never a question of whether the CDU/CSU supported a policy of *Ostpolitik* and détente, but rather which *Ostpolitik* and détente it advocated for.⁴³

Chapter four analyses the initial evolution of *Ostpolitik* under the new CDU/CSU-led government from the collapse of the Social-Liberal government in September 1982 to Kohl and Genscher's decisive electoral victory in March 1983. The chapter puts forward four key arguments. First, the element of ostpolitikal continuity was emphasized strongly by Kohl and Genscher. Second, while emphasizing continuity, the new government was at the same time aware of the double challenges to the FRG's *Ostpolitik*. These challenges originated both from the international deterioration of détente, which has been described in chapter two, as of domestic and economic concerns. Third, while continuity was indeed emphasized, it often went together with a proclamation of renewal, especially in terms of transatlantic unity and reliability. This mixed messaging of

⁴¹ Kristina Spohr, *The Global Chancellor: Helmut Schmidt and the Reshaping of the International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9 and Frank Fischer, *Im deutschen Interesse. Die Ostpolitik der SPD von 1969 bis 1989* (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 2001), 57.

⁴² The terms Christian Democrats and Union are in this chapter – unless clearly stated otherwise – used interchangeably to describe the CDU/CSU in order to guarantee linguistic variability.

⁴³ Clemens, 235.

continuity and renewal – characterized as ‘renewed continuity’ in chapter four - created paradoxical arguments at times. Fourth, while the collapse of the Social-Liberal coalition and the beginning of – what would turn out to be – a long era of CDU/CSU-FDP governance amounted to a domestic caesura in West German history, the international impact of the change of guards in Bonn in the fall of 1982 was also significant. Rather than symbolizing a “turn” (*Wende*) as the Christian Democrats had stressed, the CDU/CSU-FDP alignment actually *prevented* a decisive turn in West German foreign policy, which was underway due to the leftwards drift of the SPD.

Détente vs. Cold War?

Finally, some conceptual considerations are warranted. Contrary to one dominant historical interpretation, this thesis does not subscribe to the conception that the “Cold War” and “détente” were fundamental alternatives. Therefore, the era of *Ostpolitik* is not analysed from a perspective where détente allegedly had “transcended” the Cold War, which consequently also would entail an underlying risk of “falling back” into the Cold War. This concern was outspoken amongst contemporaries and has also been the subject of conceptual debates among historians. It is most clearly visible in the talk about an alleged “Second Cold War” in the early 1980s.⁴⁴

The conceptual framework of this thesis is that the East-West antagonism was the permanent feature of the Cold War, even if there were (selective) elements of détente from the 1960s and until the demise of the Cold War in 1989-1991. The Cold War obviously underwent different phases and degrees of East-West hostilities, rapprochement, intra-bloc cooperation and competition but one thing that remained stable throughout four decade was that the Cold War was an ideological, adversarial contest.⁴⁵ In short, détente was a feature of the Cold War, not a fundamental alternative to it.

⁴⁴ For one dominant contemporary interpretation, see Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983). Oliver Bange and Poul Villauime reject the concept in their introduction to Oliver Bange and Poul Villauime (eds), *The Long Détente: Changing Concepts of Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1950s–1980s* (Central European University Press, 2017). For recent discussions see Aaron Donaghy, *The Second Cold War: Carter, Reagan, and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) and Simon Miles, The War Scare That Wasn’t: Able Archer 83 and the Myths of the Second Cold War, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 3 (2020).

⁴⁵ See also Bernd Stöver, *Der Kalte Krieg, 1947-1991: Geschichte Eines Radikalen Zeitalters* (München C.H. Beck, 2017), 18-19

This leads to other important conceptual questions regarding the debate about (the long) détente: Did détente end? Did it “die”? Were there differences between U.S.-Soviet détente and European détente and *Ostpolitik*?

That U.S.-Soviet détente “died” in the late 1970s has been the dominant view in the U.S. historiography for decades but this interpretation is now getting challenged credibly by a new generation of researchers.⁴⁶ For détente in Europe, Egon Bahr had claimed at the time that détente had “just begun” and had to be expanded outside of the continent to, for example, Angola.⁴⁷ As the Norwegian historian Odd Arne Westad has shown, however, détente was neither indivisible – as West German politicians had called and wished for – and never expanded from Europe into the Third World despite what some social democrats prematurely had thought at the time.⁴⁸ In fact, the selective elements of cooperation between the U.S. and Soviet Union did, of course, not eradicate the two antagonists’ ideological and interest-based disagreements.⁴⁹

The conceptual approach for this thesis and analysis of the era of *Ostpolitik* is thus twofold. The initial phase of *Ostpolitik* and détente was created and established by the Brandt-Scheel government, while during Schmidt and Kohl’s chancellorships and coalitions with Genscher, *Ostpolitik* and détente centred around questions of maintenance and adjustment to changing domestic and international conditions, but with institutions and practices now solidly in place. According to this conceptual approach and analysis, it is therefore most apt to characterize the Schmidt/Kohl-Genscher tenures as stages during the Cold War where the East-West antagonism re-intensified – both in ideological, political, military and economic terms – after a period with more extensive elements of détente. Put differently: there were different versions of *Ostpolitik*, which were highly reactive to changing domestic and international developments throughout the long 1970s (1969-1982). Indeed, the German historian Heinrich August Winkler has cautioned against too linear and narrow readings of the era of *Ostpolitik*, especially among the social democrats: “The widespread tendency towards an undifferentiated glorification of “the” *Ostpolitik* is based on ignoring the 1980s. “The *Ostpolitik*”

⁴⁶ The dominant view has especially been articulated by John Lewis Gaddis. Simon Miles and Susan Colbourn have presented new convincing alternatives. The same goes for Fritz Bartel, who’s focus is more economically oriented.

⁴⁷ Fischer, 61.

⁴⁸ Fischer, 64.

⁴⁹ Indeed, as Susan Colbourn has argued, “the policy’s ambiguities—and competing definitions—became a liability. Broad swaths of public opinion failed to appreciate that détente did not mean a complete relaxation of tensions with the Soviet Union, but rather a new form of competition.” Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles* (Cornell University Press. Kindle Edition, 2022), 51.

is in danger of being seen detached from its historical references, turning into a myth and at the same time into a model for the present that is no longer critically questioned.”⁵⁰

In broader terms, *détente* thus did not “die”, as it often has been claimed in the American historiography, but rather had become – and remained – part of the strategy of how the Cold War was fought in East and West and particularly in Europe. The thesis thus adds to the growing research on European *détente* during the Cold War. At the same time, however, it is potentially conceptually misleading to talk about a several decade long period of a “long *détente*”, albeit this interpretation has been vehemently pushed by European historians the last decade.⁵¹ At the very least, there are conceptual concerns that need to be raised for this very broad definition, as it risks to distort the ideas of what *Ostpolitik* and *détente* was, how it changed over time, and which role it played (in a similar way to the idea of the Cold War as an era of “long peace” did in the late 1980s).⁵² More conceptual rigour also is needed when defining what *détente* actually was: the classic definition of *détente* employed by many historians – antagonistic cooperation – appears to be a too broad definition, in which the Cold War essentially then could just as well be coined the long *détente*.⁵³

Back in 2011, the German historian Eckart Conze had called for a “sober review of *Ostpolitik*.”⁵⁴ A decade earlier, Noel D. Cary had highlighted the need for more research on the “the question of continuity within the period of the *Ostpolitik*”, while stressing simultaneously that “this issue in turn demands an assessment of the consistency or inconsistency of the originally sceptical CDU and its Bavarian sister party, Franz Josef Strauss’s Christian Social Union (CSU), from 1969 to

⁵⁰ Heinrich August Winkler, *SPD muss erkennen: Putin will Revision der Grenzen in Europa* (Vorwärts, 13.12.2016): <https://vorwaerts.de/artikel/spd-erkennen-putin-will-revision-grenzen-europa> (accessed 5.6.23)

⁵¹ The most prominent example is the edited volume *The Long Détente* by Oliver Bange and Poul Villaume, which was published in 2017.

⁵² While Gaddis was correct to note that the absence of outright direct great power warfare was remarkable in a historical perspective, it represented a very narrow view of the Cold War. As recent studies have demonstrated, the Cold War had tremendous consequences not least due to the numerous proxy wars the two main protagonists fought in especially Africa, the Middle East and Asia. The description of the Cold War as an era of “long peace” thus hardly qualifies. See especially Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War’s Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: Harper, 2018).

⁵³ As two professors from respectively the historical and political science discipline, David Engerman and the late Nuno Monteiro, quipped during my stay as a Fulbright Scholar at Yale University in the Spring of 2019 when we discussed the terminology of *détente*: “what is antagonistic cooperation? That’s life, that’s marriage!”.

Similarly, Wolfgang Schollwer, a member of the foreign office’s policy planning staff, argued in the early 1980s that the term *Entspannung* – the German word for *détente* – was „not a particularly lucky choice“: Wolfgang Schollwer: *Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik* in *Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, p. 32.*

⁵⁴ Conze in Rother (eds.), 111.

1989”.⁵⁵ Likewise, Egon Bahr had cautioned in 1996 that the “near definitive” history of *Ostpolitik* had not yet been written.⁵⁶ This is clearly still the case today. We still need a sober analysis of the entire era of *Ostpolitik*, not least studies examining the *Ostpolitik* and influence of the FDP – again, the only party in government throughout the entire era of *Ostpolitik* (1969-1989) – and, of course, the Christian Democrats. This thesis does not finish the job regarding the latter, but it hopefully provides another piece to the Cold War puzzle.

⁵⁵ Noel D. Cary, Reassessing Germany’s *Ostpolitik*. Part 1: From Détente to Refreeze, *Central European History*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2000, 241, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4546965> (accessed 22.6.2023).

⁵⁶ Egon Bahr, *Zu meiner Zeit* (München: Karl Blessing Verlag, 1996), 593.

THE TRIUMPH OF CONTINUITY

1. “The biggest event in European politics since the war” or “a dangerous affair”? Aims, contexts and receptions of the *Neue Ostpolitik*

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, the chapter aims to provide a conception of the *Neue Ostpolitik*. Next, the chapter aims to contextualize the *Neue Ostpolitik* within the overall context of postwar German and international politics in the evolving Cold War. Three key questions will be addressed throughout the chapter. First, how was the *Neue Ostpolitik* conceptualized by its main protagonists Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr? Second, why did the *Neue Ostpolitik* become a political priority in the 1960s and not, let us say, earlier? And third, how was the *Neue Ostpolitik* received by the Cold War’s main protagonists in both East and West?

The conception of *Neue Ostpolitik*

Nowadays you can often meet the assumption that the *Neue Ostpolitik* really was about intra-German relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic.⁵⁷ This was, however, not the initial focus of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr. While it can be argued that *Ostpolitik* also was a reaction against the CDU/CSU’s previous *Deutschlandpolitik* towards the GDR - especially the Christian Democrats’ insistence that unification could only be achieved through a ‘policy of strength’ vis a vis the East and Western integration - *Ostpolitik* at first was primarily directed at improving relations with the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, Poland.⁵⁸

It is interesting that Brandt himself did not like the term *Ostpolitik* and its later association with his government’s policies towards the Eastern Bloc. But as he stated in his memoirs, the term had taken on its own meaning and “had been quickly absorbed into foreign languages”.⁵⁹ To

⁵⁷ In academia this argument also is pushed at times. See for example Gottfried Niedhart, *The Transformation of the Other Side: Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and the Liberal Peace Concept* in Frédéric Bozo, Marie-Pierre Rey, N. Piers Ludlow and Bernd Rother (eds.), *Visions of the End of the Cold War, 1945-1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012)

⁵⁸ Jean-François Juneau, *The Limits of Linkage: The Nixon Administration and Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik, 1969–72* (*The International History Review*, 33:2, 2011), 277-297.

For a good overview of German-Polish relations see Stoklosa.

⁵⁹ Brandt, 187.

Brandt, the term “*Ostpolitik*” was misguided as it gave the impression that West German foreign policy was “a chest drawer” where you could sometime open one chest, *Westpolitik*, and sometimes the other, *Ostpolitik*.⁶⁰ For Brandt this was misleading; he considered both policies to be necessary and believed that they had to be coordinated with each other. Whether Brandt’s caution was purely a rationalization made when writing his memoirs twenty years after the initiation of the *Neue Ostpolitik*, is difficult to say. But regardless of the chancellors’ intentions, the above quotation illustrates the difficult balancing act to coordinate what later would become known as the Federal Republic’s signature policy in both East and West that all chancellors and West German governments in the two decade long era of *Ostpolitik* (1969-1989) were facing and tried to manage with changing conceptions and successes.

Going back to the main story, it is important to repeat again that *Ostpolitik* initially was not about the GDR but rather a policy of reconciliation that aimed at relaxing relations with the Soviet Union and Poland by accepting the historical realities after the Second World War.⁶¹ While there was a strong degree of linkage between the three, which the Brandt-Scheel government tended to point out in its early negotiations with its allies, pushing for speedy discussion over the status of Berlin, the Soviet Union was key to any rapprochement process.⁶² As Brandt put it in his memoirs: “There was no choice, the key to normalization laid in Moscow.”⁶³ The Soviet Union had indeed been key to West German endeavors to relax Cold War tensions for years, starting with Christian Democratic chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s state visit to Moscow in 1955, leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic and the Soviet Union.⁶⁴ Certainly, the year 1955 stands out as a watershed in both West German and Cold War history. Not only did the Soviet Union officially declare the state of war with Germany over and released the remaining German war prisoners, but the Western Allies also terminated their occupation regime and established embassies in Bonn, while the two German states were incorporated in respectively NATO and the Warsaw Pact. In short, around the mid-1950s the two blocs had consolidated their position and confirmed the status

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ For a good overview of the importance of political reconciliation in West German foreign policy after the Second World War see Lily Gardner Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: from Enmity to Amity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014).

⁶² Gottfried Niedhart, *Ostpolitik, phases, short-term objectives, and grand design*” (Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, 118-136): https://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GHI_Washington/Publications/Supplements/Supplement_1/supp-01_118.pdf (accessed 20/5/2018), 125.

⁶³ Brandt, 211: “Es gab keine Wahl, der Schlüssel zur Normalisierung lag in Moskau.“

⁶⁴ The Stalin note and Adenauer’s reaction remain highly debated. See Stöver, 381-384 and Rolf Steininger, *The German Question: the Stalin Note of 1952 and the Problem of Reunification* (Columbia University Press, 1990).

quo in post-war Europe.⁶⁵ The importance of the Soviet Union in the initial conception of *Ostpolitik* is also not least illustrated by the fact that the 'Hallstein Doctrine' - a key West German foreign policy principle in the early Cold War - specifically had exempted the Soviet Union from repercussions.⁶⁶ The centrality of the Soviet Union and Poland was furthermore exemplified by the fact that the West German government first concluded treaties with the Soviet Union in August 1970, renouncing the use of force in their relations, and Poland in December 1970, recognizing the Oder–Neisse Line as Germany's eastern boundary. Only thereafter the Big Four agreement on the status of Berlin was reached in September 1971, regularizing the status of Berlin and paving the way for an easing of the West Berliner's daily life, while the East German government was recognized by the Brandt government in December 1972, regularizing relations between the two states. In short, the chronology of what can be called the initial 'treaty phase' of the SPD-FDP government's *Neue Ostpolitik* illustrates that reconciliation with the Soviet Union and Poland was deemed the necessary first step before other overtures could be made.⁶⁷

***Ostpolitikal* aims and objectives**

This section will introduce the aims that Brandt and Bahr's *Ostpolitik* had set forth. After briefly introducing the policy's aims, I will further elaborate and distinguish between two categories: short-term objectives and long-term goals.

In short, Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr's *Neue Ostpolitik* had four major aims: to relax tensions with the East, to prevent the Federal Republic's isolation in the Western alliance where several major allies had started their own détente policies, to smoothen the way for a Security Conference on Europe, and to open for increased trade and economic relations with the East.⁶⁸ Some

⁶⁵ Andreas W. Daum, 'The Two German States in the International World' in Helmut Walser Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, eBook), 735. See also Bange and Villaume (eds.) and Wilfried Loth, *Overcoming the Cold War: A History of Détente, 1950-1991* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002).

⁶⁶ Named after Konrad Adenauer's foreign policy advisor Walter Hallstein, the Hallstein Doctrine articulated the West German government's refusal to maintain diplomatic relations with countries that recognized the GDR.

⁶⁷ Bernd Faulenbach, *Willy Brandt* (München: Beck, 2013), 68.

⁶⁸ Helga Haftendorn, *Sicherheit Und Entspannung: Zur Aussenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1955-1982* (Nomos-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1986), 324. Especially Werner Lippert has highlighted the importance of *Osthandel* for *Ostpolitik*. See Lippert in Schulz and Schwartz (eds.) and Lippert's book *The Economic Diplomacy of Ostpolitik: Origins of NATO's Energy Dilemma* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011). See also Bernhard Blumenau, Jussi M. Hanhimäki, and Barbara Zanchetta (eds.), *New Perspectives on the End of the Cold War: Unexpected Transformations?*

historians tend to add a fifth goal, which was not as explicitly stated publicly by Brandt and Bahr but remained a distant long-term goal for any West German administration as instructed by the preamble to the German constitution: unification.

Brandt had early on in his chancellorship decided to refrain from talking about “unification” or “reunification” due to the “anxieties of the foreign partners”, as he explained during an extraordinary meeting of the SPD party council in West Berlin in December 1969, two months after becoming chancellor.⁶⁹ Unification was, in Brandt’s words “not at the top of my priority list.”⁷⁰ His’s deputy, Herbert Wehner, had put it even more drastically, arguing that „reunification is not possible.”⁷¹

At its core, Brandt and Bahr’s *Ostpolitik* was thus not a rigid concept – despite Bahr’s tendency to produce lengthy policy and strategy papers – but rather a flexible instrument.⁷² It was also a dual strategy. While the *Neue Ostpolitik* recognized the territorial status quo in the short turn, it did so to transform it in the long run.⁷³ As Egon Bahr put it in an internal memorandum in September 1969: “The main goal of the Soviet policy is the legalization of the status quo. The main goal of our policy is to overcome it.”⁷⁴

Short term objectives

In the short term, the most pressing issue that the *Neue Ostpolitik* addressed was the necessity of accepting the realities of post-war Europe at the end of the 1960s. Some of these realities were painful and hard to accept from a (West) German perspective. Two German states existed on a

(New York: Routledge, 2018) and Suvi Kansikas, *Socialist Countries Face the European Community: Soviet-Bloc Controversies over East-West Trade* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014).

⁶⁹ Quoted in Bange and Villaume (eds), 102.

⁷⁰ Quotation in Der Spiegel from 29.12.1969: *Russisches Roulett*: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-45226459.html> (accessed 20.5.2018)

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Faulenbach, 66-67.

⁷³ Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart, Die "Relikte der Nachkriegszeit" beseitigen. Ostpolitik in der zweiten außenpolitischen Formationsphase der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und ihre internationalen Rahmenbedingungen 1969-1971 (*Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 44, 2004) and Gottfried Niedhart, Revisionistische Elemente und die Initiierung friedlichen Wandels in der neuen Ostpolitik 1967-1974 (*Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28. Jahrg, Apr. - Jun., 2002). A dissenting view is put forward by Schaefer in Schulz and Schwartz (eds.), 45-64.

⁷⁴ Memorandum by Bahr in Franz Eibl and Hubert Zimmerman (eds.), *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1969* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000), here 1040.

territory that was much smaller than the territory of the German Reich in 1937. Achieving German unification through a policy of strength towards Moscow and isolating and non-recognition of the GDR had not brought upon the perceived changes. On the contrary, any hope of “rolling back” the Soviet Union had proven unsuccessful for the Western alliance. The Soviet squashing of the Prague Spring in 1968 and the consequent proclamation of the “Brezhnev doctrine” had demonstrated that the Soviet Union would not concede influence over its satellite states but rather vigorously defend it, if deemed necessary by military force.⁷⁵ The Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia also illustrated that the key to any future answer to the German question laid in Moscow.⁷⁶ The *Neue Ostpolitik* was thus also a symbol of the painful German acceptance that the four major powers – the United States, France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union – put higher emphasis on advancing détente between the two blocs than negotiating over German reunification in the 1960s.⁷⁷ Brandt’s Eastern policy thus acknowledged that there was a de facto Soviet sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, a decision that was in accord with the American view.⁷⁸ At the same time, *Ostpolitik* was more than an offshoot of a realist theory stressing external factors like the thawing in U.S.-Soviet relations or the détente policies of France, Great Britain or Italy in the 1960s. The policy was just as much born out of a domestic desire: the need to confront Germany’s Nazi past through a policy of reconciliation with strong moral implications.⁷⁹

The Soviet Union played a special role in Brandt’s conception of a policy of reconciliation. According to Brandt, the Federal Republic carried a historic burden in its relations with the Soviet Union. In his view, Soviet aggressiveness was also caused by German aggression in the Second World War towards it. There were thus several contexts, that *Ostpolitik* had to address. There was a specific German-Soviet context and more broadly a German-Eastern European context, which carried with it the legacy of the Second World War. There was also an international aspect, since *Ostpolitik* was part of a broader trend towards a policy of “détente” in the West and “peaceful

⁷⁵ The Brezhnev doctrine was announced to retroactively justify the invasion of Czechoslovakia and maintained that the Soviet Union had the right to use military force to maintain the rule of the Communist Party in its socialist’s satellite states. For the impact on *Ostpolitik* see Oliver Bange, *Das Ende des Prager Frühlings 1968 und die bundesdeutsche Ostpolitik* in Bernd Greiner, Christian Th. Müller and Dierk Walter (eds), *Krisen im Kalten Krieg* (Hamburg 2008), 411-445.

⁷⁶ Angela Stent, *From Embargo to Ostpolitik: The Political Economy of West German-Soviet Relations, 1955–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 156.

⁷⁷ Ulrich Lappenküper, *Die Aussenpolitik Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949 Bis 1990* (Oldenbourg, 2008), 13.

⁷⁸ See the memorandum from Rostow to Secretary of State Rusk, September 4, 1968, quoted at length in Gottfried Niedhart, *Ostpolitik, phases, short-term objectives, and grand design*, here footnote 16.

⁷⁹ Feldman, *Reconciliation*, 31-32. Jeremi Suri’s controversial argument that détente was essentially a counterrevolution - “a stick with which to beat domestic critics” – especially lacks explanatory power in the case of West Germany’s *Neue Ostpolitik*. Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 258-59.

coexistence” in the East. The Federal Republic thus risked being left behind if it would not adjust its foreign policy to the international trend. Finally, there was of course a specific German context with the two German states that now existed on the territory of the former German Reich.⁸⁰ All these factors highlight the immense implications and ramifications of the *Neue Ostpolitik*. As the historian Gottfried Niedhart has put it: “*Ostpolitik* was more than détente. It had to cope with both the legacies of the Cold War and the Second World War.”⁸¹ *Ostpolitik* was indeed a two-edged sword. It was both an effort to reconcile Germany’s Nazi past and by doing so increasing the FRG’s political maneuver room in order to cope with the changing international Cold War environment in the 1960s, which had been characterized by the stabilization of the two blocs, a spreading perception of its permanence after the building of the Berlin Wall and the theme of “peaceful coexistence” in the age of mutually assured destruction (MAD) and the aftermath of the Cuba Crisis. Germany, in other words, had to be able to move on. Or as Brandt put it in 1971: “Those who adhere to the past won't be able to cope with the future.”⁸²

Long term aims

As for the long-term implications of the *Neue Ostpolitik*, Brandt and Bahr appeared perfectly aware that *Ostpolitik*’s long-term aim would transcend their time in power. Time, in general, was central to the concept of *Ostpolitik*. In the short run, Brandt and Bahr assumed that there was a time constraint in achieving their short-term objectives. In the long run, however, time was working in the Federal Republic’s favor (at least if one could accept the division of Germany for so long).⁸³ Brandt himself spoke in 1966 at the SPD-convention of a “temporally limited juxtaposition of the two parts of Germany”.⁸⁴ This view was also reflected in an op-ed the West German chancellor later published in *The New York Times* on November 11, 1970, less than a year after the roll-out of the *Neue Ostpolitik*, where he tried to explain his Eastern policies to an American audience: “However, while achievement in West European unification and the Atlantic alliance is obvious and undeniable,

⁸⁰ Niedhart, *Ostpolitik, phases, short-term objectives, and grand design*, 122-123.

⁸¹ Quoted in Niedhart, *Ostpolitik, phases, short-term objectives, and grand design*, 122-123.

⁸² The phrase was uttered by Brandt in his speech at the extraordinary convention of the Social Democratic Party of Germany on 18 November 1971. For more see: Willy Brandt, *Reden und Interviews: Herbst 1971 bis Frühjahr 1973* (Hoffmann und Campe, 1973), 25.

⁸³ Niedhart, *Ostpolitik, phases, short-term objectives, and grand design*, 126.

⁸⁴ Faulenbach, 52.

patience, hard work, and tenacity will be needed to overcome the post-war confrontation between East and West.”⁸⁵

Hence, the defining feature of Brandt and Bahr’s *Neue Ostpolitik* was that for the first time since the dawn of the Cold War and the division of post-war Germany, a West German government articulated its interest in coming to terms with the post-war realities and accepted and aimed to stabilize the status quo. Previous West German government’s, especially under Konrad Adenauer (1949-1963), had pursued a different strategy in the early Cold War. Adenauer and his Christian Democrats, ultimately unsuccessfully, wanted to change the status quo immediately towards German unification.⁸⁶ Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr reasoned that the status quo had to be somewhat fixed before it could change and that the FRG had to play ‘the long game’ on unification. In their view, accepting the realities of the 1960s was a prerequisite for any hope of future German unity.⁸⁷ This key differentiation also explains why the *Neue Ostpolitik* was well received among the West German public. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, public opinion had changed dramatically. The fierce anti-communism of the 1950s had been replaced by a conscious tolerance of the communist GDR. Also, on the question of the Oder-Neisse line public opinion had changed dramatically. According to a poll, while 80 percent of West Germans would never accept the loss of the prewar German territory in 1951, that number had decreased to 32 percent by 1969. Similar trends were to be expected for the issue whether the GDR should be recognized by the FRG, as researchers noted: for the first time a majority, 51 percent, of West Germans believed that recognition would be “unavoidable” (*unvermeidlich*) in the long-term.⁸⁸

In addition to acknowledging the status quo and trying to ease tensions with the Soviet Bloc, the *Neue Ostpolitik* hence also reflected the growing belief among the West German public, who wanted a clean break with the countries Nazi past and believed that unification could more likely be achieved in the future through a policy of *détente* rather than one of confrontation.

⁸⁵ Willy Brandt, What is Germany’s Ostpolitik? (*New York Times*, November 11, 1970):

<http://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/11/archives/what-is-germanys-ostpolitik.html> (accessed 20.5.2018)

⁸⁶ Bahr claims in his memoirs, based on a conversation with Paul Bourdin – Adenauer’s press secretary – that Adenauer “did not want reunification”. Bahr, 61.

⁸⁷ Knud Erik Jørgensen, *Vesteuropas østpolitik. En analyse af vesteuropæisk multilateral østpolitik i 1980’erne* (EUI-dissertation 1992), 169.

⁸⁸ Figures from Der Spiegel, *Russisch Roulett*.

Articulating *Ostpolitik*

In order to further analyze the initial conceptualization of the *Neue Ostpolitik*, it is worth to examine some of the two protagonists' major speeches. The speeches will further illustrate that the conceptualization of an Eastern policy had been underway for a decade prior to Brandt's ascendance to the chancellery in 1969.

Willy Brandt's overall thoughts about the West German situation and the need for a West German *Ostpolitik* are already evident in his speech at Chatham House in London in March 1958. The initial conception of Brandt and Bahr's *Neue Ostpolitik* is then well laid out in the lectures Brandt delivered at Harvard University in October 1962, the speeches Brandt and Bahr gave in Tutzing in 1963, and Brandt's essay "*über Beziehungen zu osteuropäischen Staaten und Völkern*" from 1964. The result of this decadelong evolution was then articulated most prominently in Brandt's first governmental declaration on October 28, 1969.⁸⁹ Taken together, the documents provide – as Egon Bahr has highlighted by using an orchestra metaphor – the blueprint to the conception of the *Neue Ostpolitik*.⁹⁰ But the process also highlights, as Bahr cautioned retrospectively, that historians who portray the *Neue Ostpolitik* as a linear process from the building of the Berlin Wall to its enactment eight years later tend to fail to acknowledge that the process was not linear for its main protagonists and architects.⁹¹ To just mention one example, Brandt and Bahr's Tutzing-speeches were criticized across the entire political spectrum at the time, including from leading figures in the SPD, and significant parts had to be revised after the Soviet-GDR friendship treaty the year after.⁹²

At Chatham House in 1958, the then-new mayor of West Berlin gave his view on the state of Cold War affairs.⁹³ Brandt was convinced, as he also had already made clear in a speech two months earlier, that the Adenauer-government in Bonn was acting too one-dimensional.⁹⁴ While

⁸⁹ Here it, of course, needs to be highlighted that while Brandt and Bahr were the key minds behind *Ostpolitik* also other actors like Horst Ehmke and lower level staff played an influential role.

⁹⁰ As Bahr put it in his memoirs: "Schon vor der Mauer wurde die Melodie angestimmt, in der Rede zur Kanzlerkandidatur wiederholt, während der Entwicklungen zum Mauerbau verstärkt, in Harvard variiert, in Tutzing verbreitert, als Außenminister gedämpft, und als schließlich als Kanzler in voller Orchesterbesetzung dirigiert." Bahr, 152.

⁹¹ Noel D. Cary warned against the same tendencies in his review essay *Reassessing Germany's Ostpolitik*.

⁹² Bahr, 153: "Historiker haben es einfach, nachträglich herauszufinden und zu belegen, wie aus der Mauer das Konzept der Ostpolitik wuchs. Die Handelnden wußten das noch nicht." For the reaction to the speeches see Bahr, 157-159.

⁹³ Willy Brandt, Speech at Chatham House in London, March 13, 1958 (*International Affairs* 34 (1968) 297-304).

⁹⁴ On Brandt's January 17, 1958 speech see Wolfgang Schmidt, *Kalter Krieg, Koexistenz und kleine Schritte. Willy Brandt und die Deutschlandpolitik 1948-1963* (Wiesbaden, 2001), 219.

Adenauer's *Westbindung* in many ways was the logical first step to take for a country which precarious status was a product of the Cold War - an attempt to regain "sovereignty through integration" as the historian Ulrich Lappenküper has put it - the time was ripe to take the next step amidst the changing international environment towards a more flexible policy.⁹⁵ In March 1958, Brandt thus argued that "a speedy solution of the German problem (was) unlikely" and called for "active coexistence" and "a degree of normalization in relations."⁹⁶ Part of this co-existence, according to Brandt, was to increase contacts with the peoples of Eastern Europe.⁹⁷ Brandt also lamented that:

*"The West has been far too much on the defensive in its dealings with the peoples of Eastern Europe. Even in Western Germany there was for years a fear that we should be affected or even poisoned by our contacts with the other side. This fear and lack of self-confidence has caused us to assume a defensive attitude and to dig ourselves in."*⁹⁸

Instead, Brandt proposed, the West should show no fear and pursue an "open door policy" from a position of self-confidence that increased "human and cultural contacts" across the Iron Curtain.⁹⁹

At Harvard, Brandt was giving the annual Gustav Pollak Lectures, focusing on the "ordeal of coexistence". As Bahr noted in his memoirs, the mere decision to use the unamerican phrase "coexistence", was remarkable, considering the phrase's Soviet origin. Brandt used the term purposely to convince his American audience that the West had to change the terms meaning and subsequently use it as an instrument against the Soviets in an attempt to transform the Eastern Bloc.¹⁰⁰ In his lectures, Brandt again warned against a purely defensive posture towards the Eastern Bloc and highlighted what he perceived as the West's moral and political superiority: "The western democracies with its values of individual freedoms in a pluralistic society has good chances not only to withstand but to win the future."¹⁰¹ Brandt's call for a "policy of transformation" was in his mind only possible through taking "peaceful risks" and opening up towards influences from "the other

⁹⁵ Lappenküper, 5.

⁹⁶ Brandt, Chatham House, 297-304.

⁹⁷ John F. Kennedy would later argue the same in his "peace speech" on June 10, 1963.

⁹⁸ Brandt, Chatham House, 297-304.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Bahr, 149.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Faulenbach, 50-51.

side”.¹⁰² Brandt was in other words calling for an offensive Eastern policy that in the short run aimed at transforming East-West relations and in the long run envisioned the peaceful transformation of the communist countries in the Soviet Bloc. It was a call for a policy that was very much in line with the aims of the *Neue Ostpolitik* Brandt would lay out when occupying the chancellery seven years later. So, while Egon Bahr certainly has a point when cautioning against linear explanations, Brandt’s Harvard lectures confirm what another Harvard affiliated politician once said about the relationship between profundity and experience. In Henry Kissinger’s words: “It is an illusion to believe that leaders gain in profundity while they gain experience. As I have said, the convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as they continue in office. There is little time for leaders to reflect.”¹⁰³

Brandt and Bahr followed up with their probably most well-known *Ostpolitikal* speeches in Tutzing in July 1963, laying out the conceptual framework and the idea of “change through rapprochement” (*Wandel durch Annäherung*) - a term that was actually coined by Bahr’s deputy Rudolf Kettlein - which would later become known as the *Neue Ostpolitik*. In Tutzing Brandt and Bahr again articulated the key conceptual difference between their preferred approach and previous Christian Democratic-led governments overtures towards the Eastern Bloc. Instead of insisting on German reunification as a prerequisite for a relaxing of tensions, Brandt and Bahr turned the formula on its head and argued that only a relaxation of tensions could bring about unification.¹⁰⁴

One year later, Brandt, after being encouraged by the American secretary of state Dean Rusk, further elaborated on the ideas laid out in the Tutzing speech in an essay where he reflected on the relationship with Eastern Europe and its peoples. Rusk received the essay in September 1964.¹⁰⁵ In the essay, Brandt argued for strengthening the West’s cultural and economic cooperation with the Eastern Bloc – aiming to foster more autonomous tendencies among the Soviet Union’s satellite states - for advancing good neighborly relations, and to bring about human relief to the people in the East. The cohesion of the Western alliance was not to be affected by any such measures. Brandt’s essay caused some degree of discussion within the West German government in early 1965 after its content had been the subject of lively discussion in the *Bundestag*. These ideas were not new, as the West German foreign minister Gerhard Schröder highlighted in a cabinet meeting discussion about the

¹⁰² Ibid, 51.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Argyris G. Andrianopoulos, *Western Europe in Kissinger's Global Strategy* (Macmillan, 1988), 31.

¹⁰⁴ See Bahr’s Tutzing speech and Bahr, *Zeit*, 155-161.

¹⁰⁵ *Bundearchiv*, 150. *Kabinettsitzung am 27. Januar 1965 > E. „Brandt-Memorandum:*

http://www.bundesarchiv.de/cocoon/barch/0/k/k1965k/kap1_2/kap2_5/para3_5.html (accessed 20.5.2018).

“Brandt-memo”.¹⁰⁶ Schröder had himself - inspired by John F. Kennedy’s “peace strategy” - tried to intensify contacts with the Soviet satellite states through his “movement policy” (*Politik der Bewegung*). What was new and led to discussion within the government, was that Brandt seemed to come up with “concrete measures and comments” for and about West German foreign, thereby purposely undermining the sitting West German government – a charge that would grow even more prominently in the 1980s, when the SPD was again in opposition and de facto pursued a shadow foreign policy (*Nebenaussenpolitik*).¹⁰⁷

The timing: a perfect storm?

So much for Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr’s *Ostpolitikal* conceptions and aims. But why did the *Neue Ostpolitik* gain traction in the mid- to late-1960s and not earlier in the Cold War (apart from the obvious answer that Brandt and Bahr had had relatively little political influence before then)? The coming sections will identify a number of reasons, rooted in both domestic, international, and structural factors.

The rise of détente

The *Neue Ostpolitik* did of course not come about in a historical and contemporary vacuum. Domestically, the division of Berlin, manifested and symbolized by the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 - while Willy Brandt was mayor of West Berlin - was in the broadest sense the origin of West German *Ostpolitik*.¹⁰⁸ In one dominant interpretation, it was out of the precarious conditions in

¹⁰⁶ Schröder had himself been one of the early *Ostpolitik*-pioneers. For more see Franz Eibl, *Politik der Bewegung: Gerhard Schröder als Außenminister 1961–1966* (Munich, 2001) and Oppeland.

¹⁰⁷ Bundearchiv, 150. Kabinettsitzung.

¹⁰⁸ Arne Hofmann, *The Emergence of Détente in Europe*. Routledge, 2007); Diethelm Prowe, Die Anfänge der brandtschen Ostpolitik in Berlin 1961-1963 in Wolfgang Benz (eds.), *Aspekte deutscher Außenpolitik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1976); Schmidt, *Kalter Krieg*; Kreuzberger, *Westintegration und Ostpolitik*; Werner Link, Außen- und Deutschlandpolitik in der Ära Schmidt in Wolfgang Jäger and Werner Link (eds.), *Republik im Wandel 1974-1982* (Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 1987); Bange, *Desiderate der Forschung*, Cary, *Reassessing Germany's Ostpolitik. Part 1*, Jussi Hanhimäki in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, volume 2: crises and détente* (Cambridge University Press, 2010 – eBook). See also Bahr, 125-191.

Cold War Berlin, that “the policy formation of *Ostpolitik*” grew.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Brandt’s confidante Egon Bahr would later recall in his memoirs that “nobody could be surprised when he did as chancellor what he had developed as mayor”, adding that a new policy did not have to be developed; it already existed.¹¹⁰

Bahr’s hindsight recapitulation of the visionary Brandt deserves some scrutiny, however. Brandt’s trusted aide had a point that Brandt’s ideas were not necessarily visionary but rather a realistic assessment of the changing nature of the Cold War. Indeed, the concrete ideas about an *Ostpolitik* containing a double strategy of short-term aims and political and humanitarian gains with long-term aspirations to change the status quo had already been voiced by the social democrat long before Brandt’s rise to the chancellery.¹¹¹ But while it has been convincingly argued by many historians that Willy Brandt since the late 1950s had thought about the need to supplement the FRG’s *Westbindung* with an active *Ostpolitik*, many of those ideas by Brandt and Bahr were not necessarily extraordinary visionary.¹¹² Similar ideas had in fact been uttered by leading Christian Democrats. One notable example is Ernst Majonica, who in 1965 had advocated for finding ways to “overcome the status quo”. Other like-minded ideas had been put forward during Kurt Georg Kiesinger’s Grand Coalition where Brandt was foreign minister.¹¹³ It was also during the Grand Coalition that the Federal Republic (re-)established diplomatic relations with the Eastern Bloc’s two outlier states, Romania and Yugoslavia; opened trade representations in Poland, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and Hungary; sent a controversial “peace note” to, among others, the Eastern Bloc (except the GDR); and began written correspondence between chancellor Kiesinger and the prime minister of the GDR, Willi Stoph.

For the relevant sources on the Berlin background of Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* see *Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik* especially Volume IV, *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland years 1963-1966* on the Passierscheinabkommen and Siegfried Heimann, *Willy Brandt, Berlin bleibt frei - Politik in und für Berlin 1947-1966* (Bonn, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Hofmann, *Détente*, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Bahr, 155: „Niemand konnte überrascht sein, wenn er als Kanzler tat, was er als Bürgermeister entwickelt hatte.“ The latter observation is on page 278.

¹¹¹ See Schmidt, *Kalter Krieg*. Brandt also highlights this in his memoirs. See 16 and 64.

¹¹² Bange, „*Desiderate*“, Schmidt, „*Kalter Krieg*“; Wolfgang Schmidt, *Die Wurzeln der Entspannung – Der konzeptionelle Ursprung der Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik Willy Brandts in den fünfziger Jahren* (VfZ 51, 2003, 521-563); Gottfried Niedhart, *The East-West Problem as Seen from Berlin – Willy Brandt’s Early Ostpolitik* in Wilfried Loth (eds.), *Europe, Cold War and Co-existence 1953–1965* (London, 2004).

¹¹³ See especially Kiesinger’s speech to the CDU-leadership in early 1968: Archiv für Christlich Demokratische Politik, Sankt Augustin. Archivsignatur 07-001-023/3: Protokoll der 1. Sitzung des Bundespartei-ausschusses der CDU Deutschlands am 20.2.1968. See also Ernst Majonica, *Deutsche Außenpolitik. Probleme und Entscheidungen* (W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1965), 10.

The Grand Coalition thus had a considerable impact on the change in traditional West German foreign policy thinking on East-West relations from 1966-69. It seems fair to argue that this process would reach its climax in Brandt's chancellorship.¹¹⁴ How much of Brandt's thinking was already exemplified in the previous Grand Coalition, is outlined in Kiesinger's governmental declaration on December 13, 1966. What the CDU-chancellor outlined on behalf of his coalition was a comprehensive reassessment of West German foreign policy towards the Eastern Bloc. Kiesinger stressed the need for Germany to act as a "bridge" between East and West, reconciliation with Poland and Czechoslovakia, and advocated for the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Germany's Eastern neighbors, de facto abandoning the Hallstein Doctrine.¹¹⁵ Indeed, it is no stretch to say, that the foundation for the *Neue Ostpolitik* was laid under Kiesinger – even the term originated under his chancellorship – considering that Kiesinger was the first chancellor who believed that unification only could be the product of détente, not the other way around like his conservative predecessors Adenauer and Erhard had thought. Likewise, Kiesinger tried to "uncramp" intra-German relations and aimed to ease everyday life for the people in the divided Germany. As the historian Jussi Hanhimäki has argued, "Ludwig Erhard, Kurt Kiesinger, Willy Brandt, and other West German leaders gradually established independent ties to the East largely because the policies of Konrad Adenauer had failed to substantially advance the unification of Germany."¹¹⁶ Hanhimäki's point is also exemplified by a policy paper that was seen by both ruling parties as a bipartisan roadmap for future governments, independent of their political alignment. Tellingly, the title Egon Bahr had chosen for the paper was "reflections on the foreign policy of a future federal government" (*Überlegungen zur Außenpolitik einer zukünftigen Bundesregierung*).¹¹⁷ The degree of conceptual overlap between the *Ostpolitikal* drafts of Kiesinger's chancellery and Brandt's foreign ministry office was indeed

¹¹⁴ For the Grand Coalition's foreign policy see Dirk Kroegel, *Einen Anfang finden! Kurt Georg Kiesinger in der Aussen- und Deutschlandpolitik der Großen Koalition* (Studien zur Zeitgeschichte 52, 1996); Daniela Taschler, *Vor neuen Herausforderungen – Die außen- und deutschlandpolitische Debatte in der CDU / CSU-Bundestagsfraktion während der Großen Koalition 1966–1969* (Düsseldorf, 2001). See also Wilfried Loth, *Helsinki, 1. August 1975 - Entspannung und Abrüstung* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998); Ash, *In Europe's Name*; Helga Haftendorn, *Deutsche Außenpolitik zwischen Selbstbeschränkung und Selbstbehauptung 1945–2000* (Stuttgart, 2001); Klaus Hildebrand, *Von Erhard zur Großen Koalition 1963–1969* (Stuttgart, 1984); Peter Bender, *Die "Neue Ostpolitik" und ihre Folgen: vom Mauerbau bis zur Vereinigung* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996).

¹¹⁵ *Das Kabinett Kiesinger. Die Regierungserklärung vom 13. Dezember 1966:*

<http://www.kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Koalitionsvertraege/Regierungserklaerung-Kiesinger1966.pdf> (accessed 20.5.2018)

¹¹⁶ Hanhimäki in Leffler and Westad (eds), 203.

¹¹⁷ Bange, *Desiderate*, 722. See also Andreas Vogtmeier, *Egon Bahr und die deutsche Frage – Zur Entwicklung der sozialdemokratischen Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik* (Bonn, 1996).

striking and has been the subject of much scholarly attention.¹¹⁸ As Pertti Ahonen has put it, the Grand Coalition was “the turning point”.¹¹⁹

Coming of age

Another distinctive feature of the early 1960s was a change in West German attitudes. Under Brandt’s leadership, the SPD changed course and moved towards the political center. This development became crucial for the party’s later ability to govern with the liberal FDP, with whom Brandt also had governed as mayor in West Berlin.¹²⁰ Brandt had, not surprisingly as the mayor of a divided Berlin who depended on the American security guarantee, also been uncharacteristically pro-American for a social democrat at the time just as his commitment to *Westbindung* and NATO set him apart from the mainstream SPD. After leaving the chancellery, however, Brandt would become increasingly critical towards U.S. foreign policy, as we will see in a subsequent chapter.¹²¹ Throughout the 1960s, Brandt also underwent a profound ideological evolution, keen on a more independent West German foreign policy and rapprochement with the East.¹²² In fact, it is one of the ironies of history, that Brandt’s pro-American stance was not requited in the Nixon White House where Brandt was often referred to in cruel terms.¹²³ This irony was also not lost in hindsight on Henry Kissinger. Three decades later when Kissinger unveiled Brandt’s portrait at the German Historical Institute in Washington D.C., the former national security advisor and secretary of state noted:

¹¹⁸ On similarities and differences see Rudolf Morsey, *Die Große Koalition – Vorgeschichte und Nachwirkungen* and Oliver Bange, *Kiesingers Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik von 1966–1969* both in Günter Buchstab, Philipp Gassert, Peter Thaddäus Lang (eds.), *Kurt Georg Kiesinger 1904–1988 – Von Ebingen ins Kanzleramt* (Freiburg, 2005).

¹¹⁹ Pertti, Ahonen, *The Grand Coalition as the Turning Point, 1966–1969* in Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe 1945-1990* (Oxford, 2003).

¹²⁰ Hofmann, 3; see also Thomas Banchoff, *The German Problem Transformed* (University of Michigan Press, 2010).

¹²¹ Judith Michel, *Willy Brandts Amerikabild und -Politik, 1933-1992* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

¹²² This was most visible in economic relations. See Lippert, *Economic diplomacy*, 172.

¹²³ See examples in Michel in Rother (eds.), 130-131.

“It was the tremendous achievement of Brandt that he dared to raise the question of German national interests and attempted to relate them—and indeed succeeded in relating them—to the common interests of the West. It is one of the ironies of history that this occurred when there was an administration in office in Washington whose sympathy for the Social Democrats was limited.”¹²⁴

Brandt’s confidence was part of a wider political trend in the Federal Republic where leading politicians had become more outspoken of the countries perceived national interests and pursued a more independent course.¹²⁵ As one contemporary assessment already stressed the year before Brandt would become chancellor, the FRG was “about to become a major political actor in international politics...no longer entirely circumscribed by the will of her former occupying powers.”¹²⁶ This changing West German role was at the times also confirmed by the British ambassador in Bonn who reported back to London in April 1969 that “a new trend...among its features are a greater self-reliance, a feeling that the period of atonement for the war is over, impatience with restraint on German liberty of action” that amounted to “a new consciousness of national interest and power.”¹²⁷ The rise of the *Neue Ostpolitik* is thus closely interlinked with West Germany’s path towards more independence and autonomy by the late 1960s, where the Federal Republic was playing a key position in Western Europe and Brandt and Bahr were part of a new generation of West German leaders who wanted the country to be a more equal partner in international affairs and acknowledged that West Germany had a certain degree of leverage in both the West and the East.

The development towards a more confident and assertive Federal Republic culminated with Brandt’s election in 1969, which according to Gottfried Niedhart was part of the Federal Republic’s second transformative phase after Adenauer’s *Westbindung*.¹²⁸ As Martin Hillenbrand, the assistant undersecretary for European affairs in the U.S. state department, stressed in a conversation with the director of European affairs in the French foreign ministry Claude Arnaud in April 1970, the

¹²⁴ David Greyer and Bernd Schaefer (eds.), *Preface* (GHI bulletin, December 2003, 1-4): https://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GHI_Washington/Publications/Supplements/Supplement_1/supp-01_001.pdf (accessed 20.5.2018), 2-3.

¹²⁵ Gottfried Niedhart in Wilfried Loth and George Soutou (eds.), *The Making of Détente. Eastern Europe and Western Europe in the Cold War, 1965-75* (Routledge, 2014), 118. See also Lippert, *Economic diplomacy*, 173.

¹²⁶ Karl Kaiser, *German Foreign Policy in Transition: Bonn between East and West* (London, 1968).

¹²⁷ Quoted in Niedhart in Loth and Soutou (eds.), 118.

¹²⁸ Niedhart in Loth and Soutou (editors) here p. 118, Karsten Rudolph: „*Wirtschaftsdiplomatie Im Kalten Krieg: Die Ostpolitik Der Westdeutschen Grossindustrie, 1945-1991*“ (Campus Verlag, 2004), 273. See also the works by Banchoff and Creuzberger.

times were indeed changing. Brandt's West Germany was both more powerful and more self-confident on the international scene.¹²⁹ As Hillenbrand put it: "John Foster Dulles used to encourage Chancellor Adenauer to radiate more interest in the East. Adenauer felt that this was naive, and that the East would subvert the West. The Germans now are more confident."¹³⁰

The newfound German confidence was also illustrated by the fact that Brandt – unknown to the Christian Democrats at the time and facilitated by the Italian Communist Party – already had begun unofficial discussions with the Soviets and GDR about improving relations.¹³¹ Other changes were subtle but significant. For example, Brandt would refer to himself as the chancellor of the liberated, not the defeated German.¹³² And in another example, the incoming Brandt administration made it clear to the Nixon White House that while *Ostpolitik* was in accordance with (U.S.) détente, it was also more than just "an echo" of American initiatives, as Brandt put it in his memoirs.¹³³ In fact, Brandt's aide Bahr made it clear to Kissinger that while the *Neue Ostpolitik* aimed to be in accordance with Western détente, the White House would be informed rather than consulted or asked for advice, as Brandt's trusted aide put it.¹³⁴ Bahr articulated this new German confidence somehow jokingly and dramatic in his conversation with Kissinger in October 1969, noting that the Brandt government did not intend to enquire every two months whether the Americans "still love us" (to which Kissinger replied "Thank God" in an attempt to soothe over the fact that the German assertiveness in fact troubled him). Bahr's statement was yet another sign that the *Neue Ostpolitik* was also a way to assert and pursue a more independent West German foreign policy and an attempt to increase the countries security – so it was believed - by normalizing ties with the Soviet Union.¹³⁵

The new German assertiveness was also the product of several other transformations during the 1960s. West Germany's economic miracle helped the FRG to regain allied trust and made it possible to engage in economic cooperation with the Eastern Bloc by the mid-1960s.¹³⁶ Germany's

¹²⁹ This point is also stressed in *Strained alliance*, Bender's *Neue Ostpolitik*, and Mary E. Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹³⁰ Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 122.

¹³¹ Stent, 160.

¹³² For this, see also Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 186.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 190.

¹³⁴ AADP 1969, Memorandum of the conversation between Bahr and Kissinger, October 13, 1969, 1114–1118.

¹³⁵ Stent, 161.

¹³⁶ For the importance of trust more general see Martin Klimke, Reinhold Kreis and Christian F. Ostermann (eds.), *Trust, but Verify. The Politics of Uncertainty and the Transformation of the Cold War Order, 1969–1991* (Stanford, 2016). For the FRG's historical background on the need for security see Eckart Conze, *Die Suche nach Sicherheit: Eine Geschichte Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Von 1949 Bis in Die Gegenwart* (Siedler, 2009)

Wirtschaftswunder thus also provided for an attempt of *Ostpolitik* in the late 1960s.¹³⁷ The country's self-image also had undergone a significant change and the Federal Republic's increasingly powerful role led to significant policy shifts in foreign relations as seen in the Social-Liberal government's efforts to achieve a normalization of relations with Israel. This new Germany was most visibly during the 1972 election campaign where Brandt channeled the self-confidence in the light of the Federal Republic's post-war achievements in the - in a German context - rather remarkable campaign slogan: "Germans, we can be proud of our country." Furthermore, there was also a growing Western European dissatisfaction with the Cold War status quo. Brandt was hardly the only one rejecting the status quo in the 1960s. Charles de Gaulle in France and Franz Josef Strauß in West Germany had also developed (different) visions of their respective countries, and Europe more overall, but with the similarity of expressing a desire to become more emancipated from the Americans and the Soviets.¹³⁸ This being said, it of course also mattered a great deal that the Soviet Union at the same time had started calling for détente both in order to underpin the status quo, which was in the Soviets' interest, and in order to prevent international isolation in the aftermath of the "Sino-Soviet split".¹³⁹

Speaking of the Soviets, an interesting sub thread of the new West German confidence was the perception of the Soviet Union. It was a perception that differed starkly from the American view and would lead to many misunderstandings and irritations during the era of *Ostpolitik*, especially in its last decade (1979-1989). For the chapters' two main protagonists Brandt and Bahr, there was no immediate or overarching Soviet military threat. Rather, the belief was that the Soviets were aiming for more stability in Europe, especially considering its now troubled relationship with China. The Soviet-Sino border clashes in March 1969 were indeed one of many reasons that contributed to the Soviet calculation that "peaceful coexistence" was of vital interest by the late 1960s. As the political scientist and economist Angela Stent has observed, "one Soviet motivation for the pursuit of Westpolitik was direct result of the absence – or impossibility – of a Soviet *Ostpolitik* towards the People's Republic of China."¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, Brandt and Bahr conceived of the Soviet Union as a power that controlled its satellites by the use of force. This use of force, as witnessed in the squashing of the Prague Spring in 1968, was for Brandt and Bahr a sign of weakness and insecurity not of strength. For the two social democrats it was an indicator of the state of crisis the Soviets were in.

¹³⁷ Banchoff, 68.

¹³⁸ See the chapters by Garret Martin and Ronald Granieri in Bozo, et al and Gilbert, chapter 8. The gradual achievement of European emancipation, most clearly seen in some of the recent works on the long European détente, has been among the most recent findings of Cold War scholars.

¹³⁹ Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart (eds.), *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*, (Berghahn, 2008).

¹⁴⁰ Stent, 158.

While it was a military power, the Soviets were conceived as being politically and economically weak and these structural weaknesses made it inconceivable for Brandt and Bahr that Moscow would not suffer from an imperial overstretch in the long run. In their view, the Soviets might be able to slow down the process but would not be able to stop the overall development.¹⁴¹ Therefore, “the Soviet-West German rapprochement was possible because both sides modified their previous policies, although undoubtedly Bonn reoriented its policy more than did Moscow,” as Angela Stent noted in the early 1980s.¹⁴²

A new kind of *Ostpolitik*

Why was the Brandt-Scheel government’s *Neue Ostpolitik* - in two scholar’s interpretations - “qualitatively new” and a “clear departure”?¹⁴³

Domestically the common denominator for the Grand Coalition turned out to be adaption to the emerging French and American détente.¹⁴⁴ Internationally, NATO’s Harmel Report gave the FRG the “conceptual justification” (*konzeptionelle Begründung*) for its *Neue Ostpolitik*.¹⁴⁵ The report also had significant influence on *Ostpolitik* by claiming responsibility for the shaping of a common policy of détente and made it thus easier for the Brandt government to pursue *Ostpolitik*.

Helga Haftendorn has argued convincingly that Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* might not have been possible without the Harmel Report because the exercise of producing the report had brought the FRG back into the ranks by compromising on the German question and showing concern for its partners interests.¹⁴⁶ In the late 1960s, the Hallstein Doctrine became - in Haftendorn’s memorable phrase - a “self-restraining rope” (*Strick zur Selbstfesselung*) and was significantly limiting the scope of any West German policy towards the East. By 1968, the doctrine was effectively dead with the resumption of official diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic and Yugoslavia one year after the conclusion of official diplomatic relations with Romania already was announced.¹⁴⁷ The Harmel Report also subsequently gave the Brandt government an important argument against the charge that *Ostpolitik* was eroding Germany’s Western Alliance cohesion in order to ratify the treaties

¹⁴¹ Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 127-128.

¹⁴² Stent, 154.

¹⁴³ Haftendorn, *Sicherheit & Entspannung*, 382.

¹⁴⁴ Hofmann, 4.

¹⁴⁵ See also Banchoff, 68-71.

¹⁴⁶ Haftendorn in Loth and Soutou (eds.), 103-116.

¹⁴⁷ Bange, *Desiderate*, 721; Hofmann, 2. Quote is from Haftendorn, *Sicherheit*, 53.

of Moscow and Warsaw in the *Bundestag*, which was anything but certain at the time considering both the opposition within the coalition government from the right-wing of the SPD, elements of the liberal FDP and especially the Christian Democratic opposition. While Brandt believed that the Eastern Treaties could lead to a “normalization” of East-West relations, and ultimately could “change the Warsaw Pact”, his view was not widely shared at the time – not even within his own government. His minister of defense Helmut Schmidt, while backing the *Neue Ostpolitik* and the idea of East-West détente, warned Brandt against being overly optimistic regarding any change in Soviet behavior. As Schmidt liked to point out to Brandt and others, the Moscow Treaty had not eased the overall security problem in Europe. According to Schmidt, “change through rapprochement” was not going to happen. Rather, the *Neue Ostpolitik* – similar to American détente policies – had to be a continuation of a balance of power strategy by different means. These differences in opinion between the two men became more outspoken during Schmidt’s chancellorship and will be a central aspect of the next chapter.

The *Neue Ostpolitik* was also a reaction to the transition and international challenges to the nature of the early Cold War. Italy, Great Britain and France had, just like the U.S., all begun to develop more open trade relations with the Soviet bloc. Indeed, Brandt rose to power in West German politics at a time when the “Cold War had settled in”.¹⁴⁸ Accepting the European post-war realities was thus also a West German attempt to prevent isolation within the Western alliance. The Christian Democrat’s rigid stance that détente without progress on the German question would only consolidate the German Democratic Republic was, in the eyes of the major Western powers, outdated. Especially after the Berlin and Cuban Missile crises in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Federal Republic’s major Western allies were no longer willing to let the question of German unification hinder the development of improved East-West relations. Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* was thus also an indication that the bipolar nature of the early Cold War and the cohesion within the Eastern and Western alliances slowly were starting to erode. While the building of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis were dangerous Cold War highpoints, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had also proclaimed a policy of “peaceful coexistence” in 1954, just as the American president John F. Kennedy had called for “a strategy of peace” in 1963. Kennedy’s shift was partly due to the realization, that ‘the communists’ were not going to disappear in the near future, while the Cuban Missile Crisis had advanced a shift in Kennedy’s thinking, which elevated trade as a tool of American

¹⁴⁸ Hofmann, *Détente*, 4.

foreign policy for opening and pressuring the Soviet bloc in a non-military way. As Kennedy stressed in a speech the at the Free University of Berlin on June 26, 1963:

*“Justice requires us to do what we can do in this transition period to improve the lot and maintain the hopes of those on the other side. It is important that the people on the quiet streets in the East be kept in touch with Western society. Through all the contacts and communication that can be established, through all the trade that Western security permits, above all whether they see much or little of the West, what they see must be so bright as to contradict the daily drum beat of distortion from the East. You have no higher opportunity, therefore, than to stay here in West Berlin, to contribute your talents and skills to its life, to show your neighbors democracy at work, a growing and productive city offering freedom and a better life for all.”*¹⁴⁹

What Kennedy’s statement from 1963 highlights is the U.S. realization after the Cuban Missile Crisis, that the existence of the Soviet Bloc was a permanent feature not something that was to disappear in the near future. As the president put it in the speech: “It requires us to face the facts as they are, not to involve ourselves in self-deception; to refuse to think merely in slogans. If we are to work for the future of the city, let us deal with the realities as they actually are, not as they might have been, and not as we wish they were.”¹⁵⁰ Kennedy, in other words, was accepting the Cold War status quo and looked for new avenues to subvert the Soviet Bloc in non-military ways. The president had already uttered this aim in his first State of the Union address in 1961 where he had called on Congress for “increased discretion to use economic tools” in a U.S. attempt to reestablish ties with the “East European peoples”.¹⁵¹ Ultimately, both Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, failed to convince Congress to liberalize trade with Eastern Europe. But the example shows that Brandt was not alone in his ideas for relaxing tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the early and mid-1960s. Rather, there was a significant degree of overlap between Kennedy’s “peace strategy” and especially Johnson’s “bridge building” policies and the policies Brandt would later pursue, as Egon Bahr noted retrospectively.¹⁵² Both wanted to strip Moscow of the chance to propagate peace and coexistence, instead aiming at filling these terms with Western input and through the cloak of a defensive posture starting an offensive strategy of transforming the Eastern Bloc.¹⁵³ Also elsewhere

¹⁴⁹ John F. Kennedy, Address at the Free University of Berlin," (June 26, 1963. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*): <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9310> (accessed 20.5.2018).

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Lippert, *The Implications of East-West Economic Cooperation* in Bange and Villaume (eds), 79.

¹⁵² For more see Thomas Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹⁵³ Bahr, 150.

in Europe, détente had gained traction. France's president Charles de Gaulle was initiating his "politics of grandeur" and aiming for more gradual independence from the United States, just as Rumania and Yugoslavia were aiming for the same vis a vis their Soviet patron. Similarly, Italy and Great Britain had initiated their own versions of détente with the Eastern Bloc. Ten years after Kennedy's Berlin speech, when the United Nations had admitted both German states officially as members in September 1973, the vision of the now deceased American president seemed to have come true. West Germany had become a pragmatic and powerful European actor, who had accepted that the issue of unification had to be subordinated to global détente. Meanwhile in Europe, détente had resulted in mix of confrontation, cooperation, and communication in East—West relations.¹⁵⁴

Receptions and perceptions in East and West

At this point, it is helpful to outline the initial major Western and Eastern reactions to Brandt's Eastern policy. In short, the status quo aspect of the *Neue Ostpolitik* was welcomed in East and West, even though there also were fears in Western capitals that the Social-Liberal government would be prone to loosening its *Westbindung* if the Soviet Union might offer concessions regarding German unity. On the Eastern side, *Ostpolitik* was viewed as a potential revolutionary turn, and its dynamic intents were seen with unease since they aimed at the transformation of post-war Europe and the dissolution of the postwar settlement in Berlin and Germany. As Arnaud stressed in his conversation with Hillenbrand in April 1970: "Assuming that policies are continued to their logical conclusion, not much will be left of the postwar legal structure in Germany, either from Potsdam (1945) or Paris (1954)."¹⁵⁵ The views on the likelihood of this scenario changed from capital to capital and administration to administration, however. The mantra of recognizing the status quo in order to overcome it was something Brandt and Bahr also had heard from the Kennedy administration and took even further. Generally speaking, however, the idea of liberalization through stabilization was an important conceptual difference to American détente which sought to maintain the status quo instead of transforming it and will be dealt with in the détente section.

¹⁵⁴ Daum in Walser Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, 743.

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 121.

At its core, the *Neue Ostpolitik* brought back the debate to which extent “Rapallo-Germany” was a prehistoric fossil and whether Germany was firmly anchored in the West or desired to float in a position between West and East. These fears were typically not based on how the Brandt government conducted its *Neue Ostpolitik*, but rather historical fears and perceptions of the Germans.¹⁵⁶ Already during his time as foreign minister, Brandt reflected retrospectively, “the ghost of Rapallo had really bothered us.”¹⁵⁷ Western observers in Paris, London and Washington D.C. were split to which extent a new “Rapallo-Germany” was still a possible risk.¹⁵⁸ While present in the meeting between Arnaud and Hillenbrand, the concern was marginal.¹⁵⁹ Arnaud articulated the French fear of a future “German reunification on Eastern terms,” while Hillenbrand stressed that “left-wing elements of the SPD might be thinking in neutralist terms, but the government is not.”¹⁶⁰

One thing the French, British and American allies agreed on, was that the *Neue Ostpolitik* was important. As Arnaud pointed out in his conversation with Hillenbrand: the *Neue Ostpolitik* was probably “the biggest event in European politics since the war.”¹⁶¹ They also agreed that it was both a necessary policy where Germany finally accepted the post-war status quo but also a policy full of risks, both short-term and especially long-term. As president Nixon put it to the British prime minister Edward Heath in December 1970, the *Neue Ostpolitik* was “a dangerous affair.”¹⁶²

These fears notwithstanding, the FRG’s main Western allies were able to distinguish and assess the complexity between the *Neue Ostpolitik*’s short-term and long-term aims. Hillenbrand, in his conversation with Arnaud in 1970, already differentiated between *Ostpolitik*’s short-term objectives and what he called Brandt’s “grand design.” In the short term, a West German agreement on a modus vivendi with the GDR was paramount - otherwise the Brandt government would lose any control of the obvious international trend that the GDR was going to be internationally recognized in the near future. In terms of Brandt’s “grand design”, Hillenbrand’s view was that the *Neue Ostpolitik*

¹⁵⁶ Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 130.

¹⁵⁷ Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 178: “Das Rapallo-Gespenst machte uns durchaus zu schaffen.“

¹⁵⁸ See for example Kissinger’s memoirs, Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, 1982), 146–147.

¹⁵⁹ The term refers to the Treaty of Rapallo that was signed in April 1922 between Germany and the Soviet Union in Rapallo, Italy. The treaty reestablished normal relations between the two nations, agreed to cancel all financial claims against each other, and stressed the aim to strengthen German-Soviet economic and military ties. It was Germany’s first independent agreement after World War I and angered the Allies who felt betrayed.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 121. We will return to this contemporary assessment in a later chapter since it’s not only an interesting observation in its specific historical context but also seems necessary to assess in terms of its longevity – or lack thereof - on the SPD’s increasing leftwards drift and radicalism in the Schmidt-Genscher era and its attempts to conduct a “shadow foreign policy” (*Nebenausßenpolitik*) after Helmut Kohl had come to power in October 1982.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 131.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

assumed “that the gradual creation of a more favorable climate in Eastern Europe would permit German reunification as the mellowing process continued.” This was a remarkably clear-eyed assessment of the transformative element of Brandt and Bahr’s policy at this early stage. Hillenbrand was even aware of the constraints this long-term aim put on the chancellor, pointing out that “Brandt cannot articulate his grand design clearly because this might negatively affect its realization.”¹⁶³

This did not mean, of course, that the Federal Republic’s allies were not skeptical.¹⁶⁴ In Brandt’s retrospective view, the *Neue Ostpolitik* was viewed both with a degree of satisfaction and worriedness in London, Paris, and Washington. According to Brandt, his government encountered the least skepticism in London, in Paris the perception swung between “soft understanding and wild speculation”, while the view in Washington - according to Brandt - was summed neatly up by Kissinger’s comment to the West German official Paul Frank: “If there is to be a policy of détente with the USSR, then we will do it.”¹⁶⁵ In order to take these Western fears into account, which the Social-Liberal government was perfectly aware of at the time, the Federal Republic decided to inform London, Paris and Washington on their (almost) every initial move. For example, Bahr sent a detailed memo to the U.S., French, and British ambassadors after his first round of talks with the Soviet minister of foreign affairs Andrei Gromyko in Moscow in early 1970.¹⁶⁶ For communicative purposes, the *Vierergruppe*, (the group of four), consisting of the American, French and British ambassadors to West Germany and Bahr was also established.

While the *Neue Ostpolitik* in many ways aligned well with the Nixon White House’s détente policies – in fact, the president had in the summer of 1969 encouraged then-chancellor Kiesinger to pursue a policy of relaxation towards the Eastern Bloc - Nixon and Kissinger nevertheless viewed it as a challenge to both Western unity and U.S. détente. Kissinger even claimed later in his memoirs that he managed to rein in what to him was essentially a bad policy by linking it to his own détente strategy toward the Eastern Bloc.¹⁶⁷ Quite the contrary, however, Nixon and Kissinger’s influence on the *Neue Ostpolitik* turned out to be minimal. While there were some effects of the linkages Kissinger had established between U.S. détente and *Ostpolitik*, these linkages were rare and often counterproductive. Rather, “between 1969 and 1972, the FRG maintained the strategic

¹⁶³ All quotes in this paragraph in Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 121-22.

¹⁶⁴ For skepticism see for example Juneau.

¹⁶⁵ Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 189.

¹⁶⁶ AAPD, “note of the federal government”, 25 Feb. 1970, 308–13.

¹⁶⁷ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, 1979), 529–534 and 797–833. For an example arguing that Nixon and Kissinger ‘co-opted’ *Ostpolitik* for their own aims, see Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

initiative in East–West relations in Europe while the United States was largely confined to a reactive stance, however much it irritated Nixon and Kissinger.”¹⁶⁸

The best way to describe the Nixon administration’s approach to Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* was thus given by Nixon himself when he in a conversation with Brandt in 1971 remarked – after Brandt had thanked him for the American support of his signature policy – that he did not support *Ostpolitik* but was merely not preventing it.¹⁶⁹ Brandt was aware of the skepticism, to put it mildly, in the White House but choose to downplay it domestically where his *Ostpolitik* was already under severe attack from the Christian Democratic opposition, well aware that the White House had preferred “our (Christian Democratic) friends in Germany” in charge instead of “that son-of-a-bitch” Brandt, as Nixon and Kissinger crudely had put it.¹⁷⁰

The America-West German divergencies were not only questions of tactics and timing but also of circumstances that would continue to complicate finding common ground on détente.¹⁷¹ While the United States had global interests and a global reach, West Germany was still primarily a regional actor.¹⁷² Despite all these concerns and disagreements, Nixon and Kissinger knew that acting against the Brandt-Scheel government’s Eastern initiatives would likely have been counterproductive and caused irreparable damage to U.S.-West German relations.

Furthermore, there were internal disagreements inside the U.S. government. While the White House was skeptical and thought the U.S. had leverage, the U.S. state department praised the *Neue Ostpolitik* and stressed that America’s leverage towards the FRG was limited.¹⁷³ A state department memorandum had already in February 1968 concluded that: “If our best efforts should fail, and the FRG should move nevertheless towards limited security concessions or an even more costly bargain with the Soviets, we would have no alternative but to acquiesce.”¹⁷⁴ The memorandum goes to the root of the problem. The fear in the Nixon White House, as Kissinger stressed to the

¹⁶⁸ Juneau, 278.

¹⁶⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 966. Gottfried Niedhart has described this approach as “autonomy with American backing” in Detlef Junker (eds), *Die USA Und Deutschland Im Zeitalter des Kalten Krieges: Ein Handbuch, Band II, 1968-1990* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), 46-55, here 48.

¹⁷⁰ Michel, *Brandt*, 324. The quote is from a conversation between Nixon and Kissinger in May 1971 and quoted in Michel in Rother (eds.), *Willy Brandt*, 132. For more on the domestic criticism see chapter 4 in this thesis.

¹⁷¹ For a comprehensive account see Stephan Kieninger, *Dynamic Détente: The United States and Europe, 1964-1975* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016).

¹⁷² Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 124. See also Michel in Rother (eds.), *Willy Brandt*, 133.

¹⁷³ Michel in Rother (eds), *Willy Brandt*, 130. See also Kieninger’s *Dynamic Détente*.

¹⁷⁴ Brandt has highlighted the skepticism in the state department and pentagon in his memoirs. Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 191.

German ambassador Rolf Friedemann Pauls in December 1970, was that the Federal Republic would either become too dependent on the Soviet Union or, in the worst-case scenario, undergo some process towards neutrality or 'Finlandization'.¹⁷⁵ By referring to Finland's postwar relationship with the Soviet Union, Kissinger was implying that the Federal Republic was in the risk of modifying its foreign policy to suit Soviet preferences to such a degree that the Soviets were de facto controlling West German foreign policy.¹⁷⁶ While the *Neue Ostpolitik* was a dynamic policy aiming to transform the European status quo, the policy did neither imply a fundamental shift in U.S.-West German relations or turning its back on Adenauer's *Westbindung*. Quite the contrary was the case in the initial phase. As Jean-François Juneau has observed: "The Ostpolitikers realized that the Soviets were bound to take advantage of any contradiction between the détente policies of the members of the Atlantic Alliance, which meant that *Westpolitik* remained the essential foundation of *Ostpolitik*."¹⁷⁷ In fact, just before the 1969 election Egon Bahr had written a memorandum where he had outlined that it was paramount for any future West German government, that "the Atlantic Alliance and a close relationship with the United States must continue to form the basis of our policy."¹⁷⁸ At the same time, however, it is evident that Brandt and Bahr initially mainly accommodated Soviet demands, and that they – often in secrecy and in a clear break with the deliberate approach that had characterized post-war West German foreign policy – rushed through far reaching political agreements in an deliberate attempt to contain domestic criticism.¹⁷⁹

In this context, it also briefly bares mentioning that the American fear of German neutralism was part of a wider American concern. While the U.S. wanted to relax tensions with the Soviet Union and initially generally was in favor of European détente, it also had to be careful not be played off against its Western European allies by Moscow. What especially Kissinger feared was, as he put in his memoirs, a "differential détente" or "selective détente", where European détente improved relations on the continent while U.S.-Soviet relations did not achieve a similar degree of

¹⁷⁵ AADP 1970, "Ambassador Pauls to Bonn on a conversation with Kissinger", December 17, 1970, p. 2294

¹⁷⁶ Stent, 249. Such charges would come up periodically throughout the next twenty years and prompt strong reactions from the Federal Republic but if one examines the era of *Ostpolitik* it is difficult to find evidence that backs up the claim that *Ostpolitik* fostered the neutralization or appeasement towards the Soviets, at least when looking at the governmental level. See also Stents early 80s discussion of the phenomena, 249-250.

¹⁷⁷ Juneau, 279.

¹⁷⁸ AADP, "Memo, Bahr" 21 Sept. 1969, p. 1053. As we will see in the next chapter, ten years later Egon Bahr had undergone quite a remarkable transformation on these questions.

¹⁷⁹ Jeremi Suri, *Ostpolitik as domestic containment* in Belinda J. Davis, et al (eds.), *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s* (Berghahn Books, 2012), 145.

relaxation.¹⁸⁰ The *Neue Ostpolitik* did thus not only potentially undermine U.S. détente but also complicate the idea that any Western détente strategy was linked and had to be steered from Washington. Kissinger's fear was in fact to some extent quite ironic – or maybe completely understandable, depending on one's perspective - considering the fact that the Americans had themselves pursued a policy of differentiated détente towards the Eastern Bloc.¹⁸¹

Looking at the issue from the other side of the Atlantic, the *Neue Ostpolitik* was also partly – but by no means primarily – a reaction to what Brandt and other leading social democrats feared could be a U.S. rescaling of its European commitments. Brandt stressed these considerations in his memoirs, noting that he had thought that it was more likely that the Americans would scale back their European commitments than increase it.¹⁸² At the time, the Nixon administration had been pressured to reduce the number of American troops in Europe. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the view among many in the Federal Republic was thus, as then-defense minister Helmut Schmidt put it in an essay in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* in late 1970, that it was “not Holy Writ that the U.S. forces will have to remain in Europe at present strength forever and ever.”¹⁸³ The skepticism and fear whether the counterpart was and remained a predictable ally thus went both ways in the Nixon and Brandt tenures. Gottfried Niedhart has summed up these West German considerations skillfully, stressing:

*“Because the United States was perceived as an indispensable but somewhat uncertain ally, a feeling which increased in 1971 when the dollar was taken off the gold standard, and because the Federal Republic was confronted with an even less predictable adversary in the East, there was no reasonable alternative to a course of negotiation and hopefully also cooperation with the Soviet Union.”*¹⁸⁴

So, what about the Eastern perception of the *Neue Ostpolitik*'s long term implications? In fact, many Eastern Bloc countries, in particular the GDR, were aware of the long-term ambitions and dangers posed by Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* specifically and East-West détente more broadly. The logical next question thus becomes why they continued to be interested in détente after all?

¹⁸⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 410 and 528–529. See also Andrianopoulos, chapter 9. Ironically, this was exactly what happened as we will see in the next chapter.

¹⁸¹ See Paschalis Pechlivanis, *America and Romania in the Cold War* (Routledge, 2019).

¹⁸² Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 188.

¹⁸³ Helmut Schmidt, Germany in the Era of Negotiations (*Foreign Affairs* 49 (1970/71), 43.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

One important reason is that the Bloc's main protagonist, the Soviet Union, was interested in improved relations with the West and especially West Germany both for (geo-)political and economic reasons. Geopolitically the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, the Sino-Soviet border clashes in March 1969 and the independent policies of Romania were part of a bigger international development that the Soviets tried to counter with the diplomacy of détente. Economically, Soviet interests coincided with the interest of some West German industries that since the 1950s had lobbied the West German government.¹⁸⁵ As rapprochement got underway, business interest and West Germany's self-perception as a trading state corresponded with the Soviet interest in improved political and economic relations with the West, especially the FRG.¹⁸⁶ The Soviet leadership made this clear to the GDR as early as September 1, 1969 – even before Brandt had been elected as chancellor.¹⁸⁷ Two weeks later, a member of the Soviet embassy in Bonn went to the SPD headquarters to stress that the Soviet government was interested in negotiating all aspects of the renunciation of force. The week after, on September 22, 1969, Brandt met his Soviet counterpart in New York, where Andrei Gromyko was attending the General Assembly of the United Nations. At this point, it is worth highlighting that all these talks and signs for rapprochement were happening in the middle of a West German election campaign, but the overtures were not a matter of party politics. While the Soviets preferred Brandt, they were clearly prepared to talk to any new West German government.¹⁸⁸ It underlined that the Soviets believed¹⁸⁸ that both major political parties in the Federal Republic were interested in some form of rapprochement with the Eastern Bloc and the same was the case for most of the other countries in the Bloc. This should come as no surprise: no other Western state could offer the Eastern Bloc the amount of economic benefits that the FRG could with its *Ostpolitik*. For many Eastern European states, the Federal Republic was thus the most valuable player in the bigger development of détente that was underway.

The GDR leadership was keenly aware of the long-term aim of Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* and East-West rapprochement. *Ostpolitik* was, as one GDR observant put it, an “aggression in felt slippers.”¹⁸⁹ Already when Brandt took office in October 1969, the head of the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit's foreign intelligence department, Markus Wolf, had highlighted the danger in détente with the FRG and predicted that détente could end up endangering the GDR. According to

¹⁸⁵ See for example Rudolph, *Wirtschaftsdiplomatie*.

¹⁸⁶ Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 127.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁸⁹ Manfred Kushner quoted in Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 130. Bahr attributes the same quote to GDR foreign minister Otto Winzer in his memoirs, 157.

Wolf, Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* aimed at "rolling up the GDR from the back".¹⁹⁰ These concerns were reported by the foreign intelligence unit to East Berlin and Moscow as early as December 1969. The Soviet leadership, however, was not sharing the GDR's threat perception and considering the balance of power between Moscow and East Berlin, the GDR had to follow the course the Soviets had laid out. As the historian Oliver Bange has observed, "East Berlin could not establish its own Westpolitik, not even with the FRG."¹⁹¹

While the GDR leadership could not avoid "dealing with the devil", as the historian Mary Sarotte has put it, its initial countermove to Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* can best be described by confrontation rather than cooperation.¹⁹² While the human contacts between Germans in West and East Germany intensified, the GDR-regime further fortified the German-German border, built up the Stasi apparatus, and started a campaign for a separate socialist identity for the GDR. Still, a mere two years later, the Basic Treaty had 'Germanized' the German question. And even initial sceptics and critics in the Nixon administration like Kissinger and Helmut Sonnenfeldt, a senior staff member of the national security council who had been handpicked by Kissinger, acknowledged the remarkable change that the *Neue Ostpolitik* had brought about in its first two years. As Sonnenfeldt wrote to Kissinger on November 7, 1972, the day before the Basic Treaty was initialed, (and less than two weeks before Brandt resoundingly won reelection in the federal elections on November 19, which widely were interpreted as a public referendum on the *Neue Ostpolitik*):

*"It is astonishing in how many areas the East Germans have agreed to open themselves up to dealings with the FRG. Brandt has gone a long way toward achieving the Annäherung which Bahr set out as a policy objective a decade ago. The East German regime, to ensure his success at the polls, has decided to take the risk that this will cause some Wandel in its internal structure too and in its relations with West Germany."*¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Quoted in Bange and Villaume (eds.), 100.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Sarotte, *Dealing with the Devil*.

¹⁹³ Niedhart, *Ostpolitik*, 131.

Preliminary conclusions

To briefly sum up the main preliminary conclusions of this chapter: the key was not the ideas but the context. It was the changing domestic and international environment that made détente a more desired and plausible endeavor by the late 1960s. West Germany's first chancellor Adenauer had pursued a strategy that anchored the new German state closely with the other Western democracies (*Westbindung*) and gained membership in multilateral institutions such as the European Coal and Steel Community and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).¹⁹⁴ At a time where there was a sizeable fear of a communist assault on Western Europe, and especially West Germany, Adenauer skillfully played into these fears in order to gain concessions from the Western occupying powers. Less than a decade later, the times had changed, however. Contrary to the late 1950s and early 1960s, Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr were no longer part of a small minority advocating for a West German *Ostpolitik*. Quite the contrary, their ideas of an East-West détente had become mainstream in many leading Western nations by the late 1960s. Brandt himself acknowledged as much in his op-ed in the New York Times in November 1970, noting: “the positive development in Western Europe and the conviction that we can rely on our Western partners have encouraged my Government to participate actively in efforts to break the deadlock in East-West relations.”¹⁹⁵

The *Neue Ostpolitik* was thus part of a wider development throughout the 1960s that simultaneously had seen the stabilization of the two blocs and a spreading perception of their permanence and thus the aim of a “peaceful coexistence”. As Brandt put it in his memoirs, “the high time of the Cold War was over. The world situation had changed”¹⁹⁶ Amidst these developments, West Germany's economic growth had contributed to reducing the Federal Republic's relative inferiority to the United States and prompted the Brandt-Scheel government to exercise a relatively greater independence. As the chancellor put it in the New York Times op-ed:

¹⁹⁴ For a comprehensive account on NATO, see Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

¹⁹⁵ Brandt, New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/11/archives/what-is-germanys-ostpolitik.html>

¹⁹⁶ Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 170: “Die hohe Zeit des Kalten Krieges war vorüber. Die Weltlage hatte sich verändert.”

*“It has been said that the Federal Republic, by negotiating and signing the treaty of Moscow, has gained political weight. This may be so. But if it is so, it contributes to our role as a loyal partner of the Western family. We are on our way of becoming more equal with others, and this will enable us to take over more responsibility for safeguarding peace.”*¹⁹⁷

To coin a phrase, a warm breeze was making landfall in Europe by the mid-1960s that helped to ease some of the Cold War tensions that had cooled the continent since the late 1940s. Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* thus came at the right historical time and benefitted from similar calls and developments in both East and West.¹⁹⁸ Now an increasingly powerful West Germany wanted to set its mark on the development.

Ostpolitik and détente did of course not blow away the ideological underpinnings of the Cold War. Just like the weather, the season was changing. In Willy Brandt's reflective view, “in the early 1970s it was not possible to achieve more than we had achieved.”¹⁹⁹ By 1974, détente in Europe appeared to be sealed. Just as the Berlin blockade had symbolized the Cold War, the Basic Treaty between the two German states symbolized a new section in European post-war history. This did, Brandt reflected, however not mean that there were not going to be “cold spells” in the future.²⁰⁰ In some ways, Brandt clearly wanted to have it both ways when he looked back in 1992. On the one hand, the former chancellor was speaking of a post-Cold War situation in the early 1970s. On the other hand, he was invoking a metaphor that obviously referred to a state of Cold War – “cold spells” – to portray the ongoing antagonism between the East and the West in the 1970s.

What Willy Brandt could claim with credibility, however, was that his *Neue Ostpolitik* was validated by the majority of the West German population in the 1972 election just as Adenauer's *Westbindung* had been backed resoundingly at the polls in 1953. But where Adenauer went to Moscow two years later to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, Brandt had fallen from grace and resigned two years after his resounding reelection.

It is one of the ironies of history that the chancellor who had done more than any other in German post-war history to accommodate the GDR in order to bring the German people closer together, was brought down by a GDR-spy. At the end of Brandt's term, the facts spoke for

¹⁹⁷ Brandt, New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/11/archives/what-is-germanys-ostpolitik.html>

¹⁹⁸ Helga Haftendorn, *Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy since 1945* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 160.

¹⁹⁹ Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 233: „Anfang der siebziger Jahre war gewiß nicht mehr zu erreichen, als wir erreicht haben.“

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 231-233. The quote is on 232: ” Was nicht hieß, daß Kälteeinbrüche ausbleiben würden.“

themselves, though. The Federal Republic was now conducting diplomatic relations with every state in the Eastern Bloc except Albania, East-West trade had increased considerably, the CSCE was underway, and the Federal Republic remained firmly anchored in the Western camp. Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* thus served as the initial treaty phase in the era of *Ostpolitik* and laid the foundations for institutionalization of the West German version of détente.²⁰¹

The final institutionalization of *Ostpolitik* and détente would however first come about under his successor, Helmut Schmidt. The challenges Brandt's successor would be facing were profoundly different and more complicated than the ones Brandt had faced. While Brandt was able to ride the détente wave that had reached the European shores by the mid-1960s, Schmidt and his new foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher had to recalibrate *Ostpolitik* and approach Brandt's signature policy with a different mindset, thinking more in security terms, amidst the deterioration of détente. The new government came to power amidst the further transformation of the international and domestic environment, the global repercussions of the Yom Kippur War and the oil crisis, which made the task even more daunting. Schmidt and Genscher's primary task thus became to safeguard *Ostpolitik* during "the shock of the global".²⁰²

²⁰¹ The CSCE was a cornerstone in the conception of the Neue Ostpolitik. As the German diplomat Paul Frank, one of the key West German negotiators behind the Eastern Treaties, had put it in a speech in 1971: "I am starting with the Conference for the Security of Europe, because this project reflects the need for peace in the European world most visibly. Many ideas are connected with the idea of the conference: the conference could become a trend-setting assembly of the European policy of detente. It could ensure détente for a long time. Concepts of this kind would be unrealistic if they relied on the idea that the coming together of leading representatives of the European states alone would already guarantee the establishment of a state of perpetual peace in Europe. One has to see the goal of the CSCE differently: it could bring about concrete agreements on security and cooperation which, by emphasizing parallel and common interests, would enable a gradual, pragmatic overcoming of the division of Europe. Certainly the conference would not serve its purpose if it stipulated the division of Europe instead of increasing security in Europe, including our security." See more: „Die Ostpolitik der Bundesregierung in einer sich wandelnden Welt, 13. Oktober 1971“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008996“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²⁰² Niall Ferguson, Charles, Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel Sargent (eds.), *The Shock of the Global. The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge 2010).

THE TRIUMPH OF CONTINUITY

2. “*Trendwende*”: Helmut Schmidt, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and the decline of *détente*

Ostpolitik enters adulthood

While the *Neue Ostpolitik* came of age under Willy Brandt and Walter Scheel, it matured and entered its adulthood under Helmut Schmidt and Hans-Dietrich Genscher. The Federal Republic’s “self-liberation through *Ostpolitik*”, as Schmidt had put it, increased West Germany’s maneuver room on the international stage and the Federal Republic’s fifth chancellor aimed to make the most of it.²⁰³ The assumption, voiced by the French president Georges Pompidou in 1973, that the Cold War had “disappeared” turned out to be wishful thinking as the Schmidt-Genscher years would come to highlight.²⁰⁴ For many in Schmidt’s party, the social democrats, *détente* had transcended the Cold War. By the late 1970s, there was an outspoken fear that *détente* was about to “die” amidst a “fallback into the Cold War” and the influential FDP-politician William Borm had noted that while “the Federal Republic’s geographic, economic, political and military importance and national interest dictated that our state has to be the motor and driving force of *détente* in the Western alliance together with the USA”, Bonn had handled this role “imperfect since 1972”.²⁰⁵ Theo Sommer from the German weekly *Die Zeit* – a staunch supporter of *Ostpolitik* – noted in 1976 that the years from 1972-1976 also had been characterized by *Ostpolitik* becoming “stuck”.²⁰⁶ In retrospect, the German journalist and historian Klaus Wiegrefe coined a more apt description: the “decline of the policy of *détente*”

²⁰³ Quoted in Spohr, *The Global Chancellor: Helmut Schmidt and the Reshaping of the International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 88. For a long time, the dominant view of Schmidt’s chancellorship was characterized by descriptions as Schmidt being a crisis manager who, while handling these multiple crises adept, was besieged by ideological fights within his own party and failed to establish himself as a towering figure in West German Cold War history in the vein of Adenauer, Brandt and Kohl. See for example in the immediate aftermath of Schmidt’s death, the German historian Heinrich August Winkler’s obituary: Heinrich August Winkler, *Der Kanzler der Krisen*” (*Die Zeit*, 12.11.2015): <https://www.zeit.de/2015/46/helmut-schmidt-heinrich-august-winkler/komplettansicht> (accessed 4.5.2019). In recent years, however, Schmidt’s tenure had undergone an interesting reassessment and in some cases revisionism, most prominently visible in historian Kristina Spohr’s *The Global Chancellor* but also in Stephan Kieninger’s *The Diplomacy of Détente*.

²⁰⁴ AAPD 1973, Pompidou in conversation with Brandt, June 21, 1973, 1021.

²⁰⁵ William Borm: Wegmarkierungen der Entspannungspolitik für die 80er Jahre“ in Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-52, 6.

²⁰⁶ Theo Sommer, Bilanz der Bonner Außenpolitik“ (*Die Zeit*, 27. August 1976) in Archiv des Liberalismus, Bestand Schollwer, Signatur 126940/26.

(*Niedergang der Entspannungspolitik*).²⁰⁷ The solutions proposed by the Schmidt-Genscher government and the most powerful social democrats, respectively, differed significantly. In the end, these diverging philosophical approaches about the nature and state of the Cold War would come to play a decisive role for Schmidt's chancellorship and ultimately contribute to his downfall in October 1982.²⁰⁸

The Federal Republic's increasingly powerful role was not only rooted in the Brandt-Scheel governments acceptance of the post-war status quo and its successful attempt to influence and contribute to the détente of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The most significant factor was probably the countries increasing economic strength. By the early 1970s, West Germany had become Europe's economic powerhouse and most important export nation. It had the second largest share, after the United States, in world exports, exporting more than twenty percent of its gross national product. This growing prosperity added considerable weight to the FRG's international position while at the same time creating a circumstance where foreign policy goals and economic goals became closely linked and intertwined.

The linkage between economic, monetary, and foreign policy developed further during Helmut Schmidt's tenure from 1974 to 1982. It also set its mark on *Ostpolitik*, which had to be understood more in security and economic terms than it had been the case under Brandt, which further complicated things for Schmidt and Genscher.²⁰⁹ While Willy Brandt had been primarily occupied, foreign policy wise, with the conduct of the *Neue Ostpolitik*'s "operative phase of the bilateral Eastern Treaties", as Egon Bahr put it, Schmidt's attention initially was primarily towards economics; a result of both the chancellor's personal interest and domestic and international developments that relegated *Ostpolitik* as a political priority compared to Brandt's tenure.²¹⁰ Contrary to the Brandt era the

²⁰⁷ Klaus Wiegrefe, *Wider die Politik der Supermächte. Helmut Schmidts Ringen um die Entspannungspolitik 1977–1982 (Jahrbuch für historische Friedensforschung 2 (1993/1994))*, 103.

²⁰⁸ For a good examination of this clash see Jan Hansen, *Abschied Vom Kalten Krieg?* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG., 2016).

²⁰⁹ Daum in Walser Smith (eds.), 741-742.

²¹⁰ Bahr, 278. See also Fischer 58. Since this thesis analyzes the development of the *Neue Ostpolitik*, other important structural and political developments such as the development of international summitry and global governance will not be dealt with extensively. For a good recent examination of these developments, see for example: Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol and Federico Romero (eds.), *International Summitry and Global Governance: The rise of the G7 and the European Council, 1974-1991* (Routledge, 2014); Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2020); Konrad Jarausch (eds.), *Das Ende der Zuversicht? Die siebziger Jahre als Geschichte* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); and *The Shock of the Global*.

Ostpolitik maneuver room also decreased significantly for Schmidt.²¹¹ Rather ironically it was thus during Schmidt's chancellorship that the Federal Republic both "came of age on the global stage" (Kristina Spohr) while at the same time, in the historian Frank Fischer's memorable phrase, "*Ostpolitik* faded into a nostalgic reminiscence", and détente became multilateralized in forums such as the CSCE and MBFR.²¹²

“Continuity and concentration”

A change of tone was clear from the onset. In his first governmental declaration on May 17, 1974, one sentence stood out for what would come to neatly sum up Schmidt's overall philosophical thinking but also Ostpolitik approach:

*"In a time of growing problems around the world, we focus on realism and sobriety (Realismus und Nüchternheit) on the essentials, on what is needed now, and leave other things aside. Continuity and concentration (Kontinuität und Konzentration) - these are the keywords of this Federal Government."*²¹³

Some historians caught on to the fact that Schmidt allegedly not once used the word "*Ostpolitik*" in his first inaugural address.²¹⁴ In fact, Schmidt did use the word but only when praising Brandt's *Ostpolitik* for having been "courageous" (*mutig*) and "successful" (*erfolgreich*).²¹⁵ Schmidt endorsed his predecessor's efforts and made it clear that he and his government wanted to continue the Federal Republic's détente efforts.

While Schmidt and Brandt agreed at-large about the efforts to relax relations with the East and the long-term goal of German unification, their strategies differed significantly. Schmidt had supported Brandt's desire for a *Neue Ostpolitik* since the 1960s, but had preferred a more cautious

²¹¹ For cultural explanations see: Thomas Raithel, Andreas Rödder and Andreas Wirsching (eds.), *Auf dem Weg in eine neue Moderne?* (München 2009); *Das Ende der Zuversicht* and Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom. Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970* (Göttingen, 2008).

²¹² Spohr 9, Fischer, 57. See also Wiegrefe, 103.

²¹³ Schmidt's first governmental declaration can be found here: <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btp/07/07100.pdf> (accessed 4.5. 2019). For an analysis of the declaration, see Karl-Rudolf Korte, *Das Wort hat der Herr Bundeskanzler: Eine Analyse der Großen Regierungserklärungen von Adenauer bis Schröder* (Springer-Verlag, 2013).

²¹⁴ Spohr called it "significant", 33.

²¹⁵ Stenographischer Bericht Deutscher Bundestag 100. Sitzung Bonn, Freitag, den 17. Mai: <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btp/07/07100.pdf> (accessed 26.6.2023), 6594.

approach.²¹⁶ According to an internal analysis by Schmidt ranking likely explanations for electoral defeat prior to the 1972 election, “overhastened (*überhastetete*) *Ostpolitik*” ranked at the top.²¹⁷ Already in the early 1970s, Schmidt was thus at least in partial agreement with the conservative opposition, whose primary *Ostpolitik* criticism was rooted in the way Brandt conducted his *Ostpolitik* and not, as is often insinuated, a question of whether a rapprochement was a desirability at all.

An article in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, aptly entitled “Realism in *Ostpolitik*”, noted the week after Schmidt’s inaugural address: “no vague visions of a pan-European security order, no false hopes about convergence or ‘change through rapprochement’” were to be expected. Instead, the German daily proposed, Schmidt’s approach could be summed up as, “we have to pursue interests in *Ostpolitik*, nothing else’ because that was what the Soviets were doing and had always done.”²¹⁸

While the long-term goals broadly remained the same, both the approach but also the circumstances had changed significantly. Indeed, “Schmidt felt that he operated within constraints that Brandt had simply not faced a few years earlier, so one had to act more pragmatically.”²¹⁹ This more pragmatic approach meant that some of Brand and Bahr’s long-term ideas such as a pan-European security architecture were completely disregarded as the new chancellor favored focusing on stabilizing the existing structures. As Kristina Spohr has noted, “Schmidt always saw *Ostpolitik* as a problem of security policy.”²²⁰ Indeed, Schmidt’s philosophical approach on East-West questions rested on the importance of good relations with the United States of America. Without it, no meaningful progress on détente and intra-German relations was deemed possible. As Schmidt put it in a speech for the West German *Bundeswehr*: “the fundamental basis of our security and it remains the necessary political framework for our efforts to promote global détente.”²²¹

²¹⁶ An overly ambitious attempt to credit Schmidt and downplay Brandt’s role is Hans Georg Lehmann, *Öffnung nach Osten. Die Ostreisen Helmut Schmidts und die Entstehung der Ost- und Entspannungspolitik* (Bonn, 1984). Spohr offers a more nuanced picture.

²¹⁷ Fischer, 39.

²¹⁸ Quoted in Spohr, 47.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 33.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 47.

²²¹ Quoted in Spohr, 33.

New government, new course?

Obviously, there was significant international interest in the foreign policy priorities of the new Schmidt-Genscher government.

In early June, the U.S. ambassador Martin Hillenbrand met Schmidt to inquire about the chancellor's new priorities and political philosophy. Schmidt replied that the ambassador should take everything he had said publicly at face value and that he was sure that secretary of state Henry Kissinger was familiar with his approach. For him it really was about continuity, Schmidt stressed. In terms of East-West relations, the only exception were relations with the GDR which of course were impaired by the Guillaume-affair. In every other aspect Schmidt was determined not to change anything, he remarked. The new chancellor stressed that he would travel to Moscow in the fall and that it was important for him to show the German public that he wanted to spend his first months in office primarily focused on domestic issues. Also, Schmidt did not want to take over the invitation that Brandt had gotten while he was still chancellor.²²² Prior to his visit Schmidt elaborated on his approach in a letter to Kissinger:

*“I feel it is not only important to emphasize that I shall continue without change the policy which the Federal Republic of Germany has pursued towards the East since the autumn of 1969 in full agreement with the allied powers. I also consider that, where possible, regular contacts between the Soviet Union's top man and the heads of State or Government of the West are essential for the success of our détente efforts.”*²²³

Schmidt also stressed his interest in expanding economic relations with the Soviets from a political perspective in order to safeguard détente: “On political grounds we all have an interest in promoting this development. The Federal Republic of Germany has only a limited interest from the economic point of view.”²²⁴

In Moscow, the change of guard in Bonn had led to anxieties. Hans-Dietrich Genscher had become foreign minister after Walter Scheel had become president, and Schmidt insisted in talks

²²² „Vermerk Gespräch Schmidt Amerikanischer Botschafter 7.6.1974“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006931“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²²³ „Konzept: Letter Schmidt to Kissinger 18.10.1974“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006579“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²²⁴ „Konzept: Letter Schmidt to Kissinger 18.10.1974“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006579“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

with the Soviet ambassador Valentin Falin that the new foreign minister should participate in the forthcoming talks in Moscow to display the agreement and unity of the federal government.²²⁵ As state secretary Otto Schlecht told Genscher about his travels to Moscow in June 1974: “In all conversations there was a distinct insecurity about the Ostpolitikal course of the new federal government noticeable; they also scent a change of course in the aftermath of the government shakeup.”²²⁶

Soviet ambassador Falin had remarked to German officials that he “considered his mission to be failed” after Brandt’s resignation and was expected to be dismissed shortly (Falin remained ambassador in Bonn until 1978). Contrary to Brandt and Bahr, with whom he had close relationships, Falin remarked, he only knew Schmidt and Genscher “superficial”, which led to “great unease” (*Größtes Unbehagen*) about how “to assess and categorize Schmidt politically”.²²⁷ “How”, so the ever repeating Soviet question according to a German official, “does Schmidt position himself towards the Soviet Union, towards the *Ostpolitik*, in which way will he affect it, what will his principles be?”²²⁸ Overall, the Soviet expectation was that *Ostpolitik* would be conducted even more “extensively” from the Chancellery after the change of guards than under the Brandt-Scheel government.²²⁹

In a message from Brezhnev to Schmidt 20. May 1974, responding to Schmidt’s conversation with Falin ten days earlier, the general secretary remarked that the new chancellor’s considerations to continue Brandt’s policy towards the East had been “noted with gratification” (*Genugtuung*). Brezhnev furthermore stressed that it would be important to expand the economic ties between the two countries in the future.²³⁰

²²⁵ “Vermerk gespräch bk falin, 25.9.1974“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006961“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²²⁶ “Brief Schlecht an Genscher, 14. Juni 1974“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009325“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²²⁷ AAPD 1974, document 146, „Aufzeichnung des Vortragenden Legationsrats I. Klasse Meyer-Landrut Betr.: Beurteilung der innenpolitischen Lage in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland durch die sowjetische Botschaft“, quote is on page 624.

²²⁸ AAPD 1974, document 146, „Aufzeichnung des Vortragenden Legationsrats I. Klasse Meyer-Landrut Betr.: Beurteilung der innenpolitischen Lage in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland durch die sowjetische Botschaft“, quote is on page 624.

²²⁹ AAPD 1974, document 146, „Aufzeichnung des Vortragenden Legationsrats I. Klasse Meyer-Landrut Betr.: Beurteilung der innenpolitischen Lage in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland durch die sowjetische Botschaft“, quote is on page 624.

²³⁰ AAPD 1974, Aufzeichnung des Bundeskanzlers Schmidt 20. Mai 1974, 639-642.

The Polish “cold shower”

In other Eastern Bloc states there was also a combination of sadness that Brandt had resigned and insecurity about the course the new government would set. For example, the Polish deputy foreign minister Czyrek remarked on May 8, 1974, the day after Brandt had resigned, that the Polish regretted not having finished the bilateral negotiations last year while Brandt and Scheel were still in office. The German ambassador in Warsaw, Hans Hellmuth Ruete, tried to reassure Czyrek that the new government would continue the Brandt-Scheel *Ostpolitik*. At the same time, however, Poland should also try to help the new West German government succeed by being willing to compromise in the ongoing negotiations, especially in the question of resettlement, Ruete stressed.²³¹

Initially, Schmidt and Genscher expanded some of the existing contacts to Eastern European States that had been at the core of Brandt’s bilateral phase of *Neue Ostpolitik*. Relations with Poland and economics were at the forefront of these developments. In August 1975, the Schmidt-Genscher government agreed to a 1,3 billion DM lumpsum for Polish pension claims plus a 1 billion DM credit on very lucrative conditions, at significant costs for the West German taxpayers. In return, the Polish government opened up to 125.000 persons of German descent, many from the former German *Ostgebiete*, being able to obtain permits to leave the country. The exact number had been at the center of long and tough negotiations.²³²

The way to an agreement was long and the initial Polish treatment harsh, however. As an internal analysis by ambassador Ruete noted after an intensive exchange with Edward Gierek, the first secretary of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party: “The purpose of Gierek's remarks was obviously to turn the cold shower that we are currently exposed to on the biggest spurt (*die kalte Dusche, der wir gegenwärtig ausgesetzt sind, auf den größten Strahl zu drehen*) and confront the new federal government with the Polish *Maximalposition*.”²³³

There was most likely also a bigger underlying issue at play in the intense debate: Polish fears of a too close relationship between Bonn and Moscow on the cost of Warsaw remained ever-present. As a German assessment noted, “the Polish fear for a German-Russian understanding

²³¹ AAPD 1974, Botschafter Ruete, Warschau, an das Auswärtige Amt 8. Mai 1974, 620-622.

²³² AADP 1974, Botschafter Ruete, Warschau, an das Auswärtige Amt 28. Mai 1974, 651-655.

²³³ AADP 1974, ”Botschafter Ruete, Warschau, an das Auswärtige Amt 11. Juni 1974, Betr.: Deutsch-polnische Beziehungen; hier: Gespräch mit Parteichef Gierek bei der Posener Messe, 704-707. Quote is on page 706.

to a Polish disadvantage overlooks that the German détente policy differs from the American détente policy in that it grants the smaller Eastern European countries a special place” (emphasis in original document).²³⁴

Dealing with the devil

Relations with the GDR remained tense. Similar to under Brandt and Scheel, West German payments were necessary to achieve human improvements and prompt the release of jailed West German citizens and GDR dissidents. On one hand, the dubious dealings continued to illustrate how the GDR leadership succeeded in extorting West German governments at a time when East Berlin became more dependent on Western currency. On the other hand, the payments brought upon human improvements, which of course was in the (West) German interest.

These fraught practices have left historians with the difficult question who got most out of the deal: the FRG, who could afford the buyouts but engaged in a problematic form of *Menschenhandel*, or the GDR who succeeded in blackmailing its powerful neighbor but at the same time suffered from brain drain while becoming ever more dependent on the West’s money due to the failure of its own system? These questions are hard to answer conclusively. Not least because we need to ask ourselves, whether there was a clear alternative to “dealing with the devil” as Mary Sarotte has put it, notwithstanding the political and ethical dilemmas and setbacks the *Menschenhandel* entailed? Regardless of one’s answer to the questions posed, they highlight another feature of détente that was put aptly by the economist and political scientist Angela Stent during the Cold War: “the economic component of détente may well increase in salience, but it cannot serve as a guarantee of the political stability of détente.”²³⁵

At the time, it was clear, as Frank Fischer has noted, that the GDR had gotten what it wanted out of the initial rapprochement with the Federal Republic. Indeed, the hoped “normalization” of relations with the GDR - a core aim of Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* - was difficult to spot. Rather, German-German relations came to a standstill after the GDR had achieved its initial aims. As the

²³⁴ „Lage in der polnischen Führung 9.8.1979“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006843“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn. According to the political scientist Karl Kaiser, who was close to the SPD, by the late 1970s, Gierak was afraid that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan could “lead to a turn of East-West relations” which could jeopardize Poland’s own détente channels with FRG. „Brief Kaiser an Schmidt 26.2.1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006843“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

²³⁵ Stent, 252.

German historian Heinrich Potthoff has noted, “Bahr’s illusion” was the idea that the Eastern Treaties would lead the GDR to act “like a reasonably civilized state after all”.²³⁶ While the *Neue Ostpolitik* had contributed to preventing “a further drifting apart of the German nation”, the idea of a “regulated coexistence” (*geregeltes Nebeneinander*), a core aim of the Basic Treaty, had not manifested itself, just as conservative critics had warned.²³⁷ Willy Brandt acknowledged as much in 1976 when he remarked that progress had been difficult and talked about the political equivalent of the phrase ‘it takes two to tango’, stressing that *Ostpolitik* depended on the other side’s willingness to cooperate: “you can only conduct this policy if you have a partner.”²³⁸

The pinnacle of détente

The increasing multilateralization of *Ostpolitik* and détente was most visible in the negotiations within the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The signing of the Helsinki Accords on August 1, 1975, in hindsight represented the preliminary pinnacle of the era of détente.²³⁹ In fact, this view was common at the time as well. As Kristina Spohr has noted, “the signing of the Final Act...was seen by many as the pinnacle of détente in Europe and a highlight of *Ostpolitik*.”²⁴⁰

The multilateralization of détente through the CSCE also meant that détente progress became slower. The negotiations for a pan-European security conference in form of the CSCE had been going on since 1973 and dragged on for two years before the Final Act was signed in August 1975. But “once the images of Helsinki had disappeared from the newspapers and TV screens, the momentum died. The follow-up conference was not scheduled until 1977 and in the short term the Helsinki accords made little tangible difference to daily life behind the Iron Curtain.”²⁴¹

²³⁶ Quoted in Fischer, 62.

²³⁷ Quoted in Fischer, 62.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ For good accounts of the CSCE and the Final Act see Angela Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente: How the West Shaped the Helsinki CSCE* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2009); Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*; Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Matthias Peter and Hermann Wentker (eds.), *Die KSZE im Ost-West-Konflikt: Internationale Politik und gesellschaftliche Transformation 1975–1990* (Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013).

²⁴⁰ Spohr, 52.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

At the time, the criticism from the German Christian Democrats and other parties in the West had been severe. Nowadays, it has become accepted wisdom that the West got the better deal in Helsinki and that the Final Act to some degree contributed to the events of 1989 and the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War. In the mid-1970s, however, there was sufficient contemporary evidence to conclude that the Helsinki Accords were a (short-term) victory for the Soviet Union and the GDR. For the latter, the Final Act recognized existing borders and states and the signatories renounced the right to intervene in other states' international affairs. The Soviet and East German leaders could hardly have hoped for a better outcome, at least initially. The Final Act had granted the GDR dictatorship significant legitimacy and elevated Erich Honecker to equal status, at least symbolically, with Helmut Schmidt. Furthermore, the leader of the GDR regime now had the chance to meet with the world's most powerful man, U.S. president Gerald Ford.²⁴²

For Helmut Schmidt, the Helsinki Final Act was „a new intermediate stage...of our *Ostpolitik*.“²⁴³ In the long run, the three baskets – especially the third basket, which contained declarations of certain human rights and humanitarian issues – proved useful.²⁴⁴ To name but one example, East German applications to emigrate increased by over 50 percent in 1976, the year after the passing of the Helsinki Accords and after the Accords had been reprinted in full in the magazine *Neues Deutschland*.²⁴⁵ Since the Helsinki Final Act was not a treaty under international law but a political agreement, it was up to the 35 countries in East and West to honor the act. As many historians have demonstrated since, the Final Act strengthened civil societies and civil right groups in the East and made it easier for the West to call upon the Eastern regimes to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms.²⁴⁶

Two years later, in 1977, Schmidt summed up the CSCE's development in seven points, stressing that the Helsinki Final Act represented a “milestone” compared to the thirty years before. While the results were not satisfying yet, they represented important improvements

²⁴² Peter C. Caldwell and Karrin Hanshew, *Germany since 1945: Politics, Culture, and Society* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 208.

²⁴³ Quoted in Fischer, 53. Indeed, the idea of Helsinki being an “interim stage” is also popular in the historiography where *Ostpolitik* and Helsinki are viewed in a fairly linear way. In this view 1969 led to 1975 which again led to 1989. When examining the Schmidt-Genscher era and subsequent Kohl-Genscher epoch – the subject of chapters 3 and 4 - it seems more appropriate to characterize Helsinki as “détente's point of culmination” (*Kulminationspunkt der Entspannung*), though, as the historian Frank Fischer has done. See Fischer, 56.

²⁴⁴ As Wolfgang Schollwer would note in 1981: „Particularly we Germans have profited from the Third Basket of the Final Act so far”. See more: Wolfgang Schollwer: Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik in *Archiv des Liberalismus*, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, 19.

²⁴⁵ Caldwell and Hanshew, 208.

²⁴⁶ See footnote 243.

concerning economic relations and family reunions.²⁴⁷ Schmidt however also cautioned that governments should be alert about the danger that the détente dialogue could “fizzle out”. Developments in other parts of the world such as Africa and the Indian ocean should not be excluded from the attempt to reduce tensions, Schmidt argued: “It is necessary to maintain the détente dialogue, to intensify it and to expand it geographically”. For the future, the chancellor proposed that the debate about human rights would be of crucial importance in the long run in the ideological confrontation between democratic and communist societies. To Schmidt, détente would find its proper sense in the realization of human dignity, and “therefore there is no contradiction between the policy of détente and fighting for human rights.” Major rhetorical efforts however risked undermining real progress, according to the chancellor; a comment that easily can be interpreted as a dig against American president Jimmy Carter. For Schmidt, détente was essentially a long-term process with two main goals: gradually defusing conflicts and building up elements of better cooperation between East and West.²⁴⁸

Different conceptions of détente

By the mid-1970s, the détente efforts had started to falter. This was especially the case for Soviet-American relations. Few if any tangible results were achieved in the aftermath of the Moscow summit and SALT I. Strategic arms control negotiations went nowhere and little of substance was achieved within the frameworks of MBFR, SALT II and high-level summitry in Schmidt’s first years in office.

The stalling of progress revigorated an old debate about the aims and means of détente. Here Americans, Soviets, and West Germans had profoundly different views.²⁴⁹ For the United States, détente meant accepting Soviet power while at the same attempting to enmesh the Soviets in a network of relations that helped contain communist expansion, a tactic referred to as “linkage”. The Soviets, however rejected the idea of linkage. Instead, détente for the Kremlin signified the American recognition of Soviet might and helped advance its geopolitical and ideologically expansionism in

²⁴⁷ These developments are one of the key reasons that historians like Konrad Jarausch describe the CSCE as an important forum that “institutionalized détente”. Konrad H. Jarausch, *Out of Ashes* (Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition, 2016), 653.

²⁴⁸ „Zusammenfassung Diskussionsbeitrag Schmidt, 16. April 1977“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006693“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn. For a comprehensive account see Kieninger, *The Diplomacy of Détente* and Spohr’s *The Global Chancellor*.

²⁴⁹ For a recent examination see Kieninger *Dynamic Détente*.

the Third World.²⁵⁰ Détente, for the Nixon-administration, was a tool in the competition with the Soviet Union. As Henry Kissinger explained in a meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister in August 1975, the goal was “to weaken Soviet political influence.” The rationale, Kissinger elaborated, was that the U.S. could weaken the Soviets “more effectively by détente than we could by cold war.”²⁵¹ This line of thinking changed in the U.S. throughout the 1970s. Despite all the different conceptions of détente both within the Western camp and between East and West, the common denominators for both actors were that détente was only a valuable policy if it was beneficial to one’s own security and economy. In Europe, the common view tended to be that this was the case. In the U.S., this was by the late 1970s not the case anymore.²⁵²

For Willy Brandt, the CSCE should give new impulses to the détente process. At a party chairmen conference in Amsterdam in 1977, the former chancellor concluded that there was “no realistic alternative to détente”. This was one of the most often heard arguments from Brandt and his associates. While Schmidt and Genscher agreed in principle, they had turned the credo on its head and developed a call for a “realistic policy of détente” by the mid-1970s. This is where the actual debate about détente was to be fought now. It was not rooted in straw man fallacies articulated by Brandt and many prominent social democrats as ‘détente vs. an (unrealistic) alternative’. By the mid-1970s, the West German détente debate had become an intense discussion about *how* to conduct détente. One side, among them Brandt, proposed the idea that “only détente can help prevent a catastrophe” while their opponents cautioned that creating unrealistic expectations could in fact undermine détente. They added, that while détente in Europe would obviously be an advantage, narrowly viewed, these developments could give room for an escalation of tensions elsewhere that could spill over to the European continent. The argument that “only détente can help make the peace more secure”, another one of Brandt’s mottos, was thus probably true for Western Europe, while it remains up to debate whether détente in Europe inadvertently contributed to making the world less safe elsewhere. Willy Brandt was of course aware of these potential pitfalls and worked towards a global détente, stressing in 1977: “The policy of détente as a dynamic process cannot be realized

²⁵⁰ Spohr, 53. See also John Van Oudenaren, *Detente in Europe: The Soviet Union & The West Since 1953* (Duke University Press, 1991); Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Richard Pipes, *U.S.-soviet Relations in the era of détente* (Routledge, 2019); Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Brookings Institution, 1985) and *The Strained Alliance*.

²⁵¹ Quoted in Niedhart, *The Long Détente*, 26.

²⁵² These transatlantic differences are well explained in *The Strained Alliance* and *The Long Détente*.

without taking account for developments outside of Europe. Détente will only continue on if the reasons behind the tensions will be removed.”²⁵³

In the aftermath of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, the Soviet Union declared that “political détente” had now been achieved and that the next aim should be “military détente”. This was welcome in Bonn where Brandt had called for military détente since the early 1970s and saw the military aspect of détente as a kind of litmus test. As an internal West German assessment had pointed out in early 1974: “the military aspects are a test not only for the willingness of the SU to reduce the dangers of military concentration, but for the readiness of the East to détente.”²⁵⁴ Helmut Schmidt however reacted with suspicion and concerns of Soviet extortion. While the chancellor desired military détente, he saw the new Soviet emphasis on military détente as yet another attempt of breaking up NATO. His foreign minister Genscher agreed and had previously voiced similar concerns.²⁵⁵ Consequently, unilateral Western European reductions were a no-starter. Instead, Schmidt continued to lobby for the strengthening of NATO’s conventional forces.²⁵⁶

From “*Neue Ostpolitik*” to “realistic détente”

The call for rearmament set Schmidt on early collision course with his own party. In the runup to the federal elections of 1976 the differences between Schmidt and his party became clearer. Not only did Schmidt’s focus on the military balance and calls for substantial Western rearmament set the chancellor at odds with leading influential social democratic figures like Brandt, Bahr and thus also the left wing of the SPD. At the same time, the differences also illustrated the transformation that the previous *Neue Ostpolitik* had undergone in the two-year span from Schmidt’s election in 1974 to his first election campaign as chancellor in 1976. During Schmidt and Genscher’s first two years at the helm of West German foreign policy the strategy of the “*Neue Ostpolitik*” had become a strategy of a “realistic policy of détente” (*realistische Entspannungspolitik*).²⁵⁷

²⁵³ „Parteiführerkonferenz Amsterdam, 16.-17 April 1977“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006693“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn. For a good introduction on the topic of dynamic détente see Kieninger.

²⁵⁴ AAPD 1974, Dokument 2, Aufzeichnung des Vortragenden Legationsrats I. Klasse Ruth, 4. Januar 19741, 6-8. Quote on page 7.

²⁵⁵ Ostpolitik: Nichts mehr zu verschenken (*Der Spiegel*, no. 51/1975): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41343367.html> (accessed May 4.5.2019).

²⁵⁶ Spohr, 53-54.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

The reasons behind these changes and subsequent slowdowns were multifold. One explanation was détente's and thus also *Ostpolitik*'s multilateralization, which was now conducted in forums like MBFR and CSCE, which led to deceleration. Another factor were different international conditions, which contributed to a change in political priorities amidst the cooling in U.S.-Soviet relations and Soviet expansionism in the Third World. Schmidt's different ostpolitikal philosophy of course also played a key role. Last but not least the move towards a "realistic policy of détente" was the result of both domestic and international developments. Domestically, it was intricately connected with the rise of Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Genscher had become both foreign minister and chairman of the FDP in 1974 and, similar to Schmidt, was a "brakeman" (*Bremser*) compared to Brandt and Scheel. Internationally, Schmidt and Genscher's "realistic policy of détente" echoed the dominant view in the United States by the mid-1970s.²⁵⁸

Schmidt and Genscher's course change was controversial. Semantically, it implied that the previous Brandt-Scheel government's ostpolitikal conduct had been unrealistic – and this was exactly how it was interpreted in the press, as a criticism - even though Brandt himself had cautioned the year after the election that "those who freight détente with illusionary expectations are not contributing to securing the peace but facilitate a climate of insecurity, instability and tense lability."²⁵⁹ In fact, however, this was exactly how leading politicians and proponents of Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* now understood especially Genscher's conceptualization. The foreign minister had stressed that "the policy of détente does not create relaxation; it only lessens the source of friction for conflict."²⁶⁰ In light of this statement, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* noted, "the great vision of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr that detente can lead to a new quality in the relationship between West and East, is no longer the question."²⁶¹ As Egon Bahr lamented in his memoirs, he had understood Genscher's approach to be an affront to "those that hat proved their verisimilitude (*Wirklichkeitsnähe*) through results."²⁶² While Bahr could point to results in the treaty phase of *Ostpolitik*, the adjustment towards a so-called "realistic policy of détente" also reflected that the limits of West German *Ostpolitik* had become more pronounced by the mid-1970s. As the historian Jan Behrends has pointed

²⁵⁸ Fischer, 58, footnote 5.

²⁵⁹ „Parteiführerkonferenz Amsterdam, 16.-17 April 1977“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006693“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

²⁶⁰ „Ostpolitik: Nichts mehr zu verschenken“ (*Der Spiegel*, no. 51/1975): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41343367.html> (accessed May 4, 2019).

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² Bahr, 485.

out: "In fact, it soon became clear that *Ostpolitik* was only partially able to defuse tension."²⁶³ Indeed, as Behrends remarked, it could even be argued that the rapprochement, especially economically, had helped finance Soviet expansionism, and thus also undermined détente in other areas.²⁶⁴

But what was behind the semantic shift? To some extent, it was indeed a thinly veiled criticism of the previous governments' policy. If Schmidt and Genscher advocated for a "realistic policy of détente", what had Brandt and Scheel then pursued: an unrealistic policy? The larger implications, however, were more systemic and structural in nature. Brandt and Scheel's *Neue Ostpolitik* had achieved a certain set of goals bilaterally under favorable international conditions. During Schmidt and Genscher's first two years in office, these circumstances changed significantly and a new dominant and more détente-skeptical narrative emerged – Genscher allegedly internally called it "the end of an era" - which was neatly summed up by *Der Spiegel* summed up in a headline in December 1975: "*Ostpolitik*: nothing to give away anymore" (*Nichts mehr zu verschenken*). As the magazine noted, Genscher's core thesis "sound like a farewell to the Bonn euphoria of the early Social-Liberal days".²⁶⁵

These changes were addressed most clearly before and after the federal elections in October 1976. At NATO's Spring conference in Oslo Genscher stressed that the Atlantic Alliance had to revitalize itself both militarily and politically. Six months later the West German foreign minister called out the dichotomy between the Soviet calls for military détente while pursuing a significant arms buildup at the same time. The foreign minister also criticized the Soviet intervention in Angola and stressed that Soviet expansionism remained integral to Moscow's conception of détente. In short, in Bonn's eyes, détente had not overcome the Cold War; the Soviet Union "simply pursued old aims with other means."²⁶⁶ For West Germany, this meant that the Ostpolitikal aims had to change. As Kristina Spohr has put it:

²⁶³ Jan, Behrends, Das Ende der Ostpolitik (*Zeitgeschichte Online*, September 2014): <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/kommentar/das-ende-der-ostpolitik> (accessed 25.6.2023).

²⁶⁴ Jan, Behrends, Das Ende der Ostpolitik (*Zeitgeschichte Online*, September 2014): <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/kommentar/das-ende-der-ostpolitik> (accessed 25.6.2023).

²⁶⁵ „Ostpolitik: Nichts mehr zu verschenken“ (*Der Spiegel*, no. 51/1975): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41343367.html> (accessed 4.5.2019)

²⁶⁶ Spohr, 54.

*“Helmut Schmidt had been an apostle for détente and one of the early architects of Ostpolitik. By late 1976, however, when facing re-election, the chancellor’s security policies had become deterrence and defence first, détente second. The principle of balance now dominated.”*²⁶⁷

Selective détente?

Foreign policy figured relatively little as a topic in the 1976 election campaign. It was only in the last weeks of the election that the SPD shifted its course and campaigned on a slogan of voting for peace (*den Frieden wählen*). The shift reflected the desire from especially Brandt and Bahr to use *Ostpolitik* as a potential vote-winner. It was also in the end of the 1976 campaign that social democrats like Brandt started articulating the need of a “second phase of *Ostpolitik*”, thereby indirectly acknowledging that little of relevance had come about since the end of the bilateral treaty phase (apart from the CSCE).²⁶⁸ Schmidt, arguing in a similar vein, promised a visit from Soviet general secretary Brezhnev if he were reelected as part of this attempt for a second phase and a “new impulse to improve contacts with the East.”²⁶⁹

After Schmidt’s reelection – which the SPD internally judged to have come about due to the late emphasis on *Ostpolitik* – the chancellor reshuffled his cabinet. Egon Bahr left the post of minister of economic cooperation and became the SPD’s executive party secretary instead. While this was likely not Schmidt’s intention, the degrading of Bahr gave the so-called architect of the *Neue Ostpolitik* the opportunity to speak more open about his preferred foreign policy course as it was not under the pressure of cabinet discipline.²⁷⁰ Indeed, Bahr certainly did not waste time to articulate his opinions.

Little less than two weeks after the federal election, Bahr sent a letter to Schmidt where he laid out his political priorities. For the new executive party secretary, the MBFR negotiations should be the cornerstone, and Bahr claimed, that the troop reductions could have the same effect in the next election in 1980 as the Basic Treaty had had in 1972.²⁷¹ Bahr also contended about arms

²⁶⁷ Ibid. Schmidt then asserted that “Ostpolitik had become an aspect of defense policy”.

²⁶⁸ Spohr, 55.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, 56.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

control more generally: “(the) topic will have the same effect as the first phase of *Ostpolitik*. It will stir people’s imagination, integrate the party, create solidarity within the coalition and split the opposition”.²⁷² As Kristina Spohr has highlighted: “Here was a marker for the future: Bahr’s consistent emphasis on disarmament and détente to move Europe beyond bipolarity, in tension with Schmidt’s insistence on an East-West military balance as the basis for détente.”²⁷³

Indeed, in the aftermath of the Schmidt-Genscher government’s narrow electoral victory in the fall of 1976 these different conceptions between Schmidt and Genscher and a significant part of the SPD were highlighted in the government’s discussions, where it was noted that there was “no dissent” between Schmidt and Genscher on those questions.²⁷⁴ The same month, at a SPD-foreign policy conference in April 1976 Egon Bahr had argued that “détente is a process that knows setbacks but no alternative.”²⁷⁵ In the same speech, Bahr made the argument that there was, in effect, a selective détente, stating that the “opponents of détente” could not expect that “détente applied to areas where no agreements had been made.”²⁷⁶ “The world is not suffering from the fact that there is too much détente,” Bahr went on, “but rather that there is not enough”.²⁷⁷

During the coalition negotiations in December 1976, Bahr’s approach was both indirectly backed up and rebuffed. The negotiating parties agreed that the Atlantic Alliance was “existential” and that it was important to nurture bilateral relations, “firstly” with United States, “the most important partner”. Already here, however, potential problems were evident with the election of a new president in the United States. Jimmy Carter had made human rights and a more moralistic, and thus confrontational, foreign policy a cornerstone of his campaign. Similarly, the Soviet military buildup and interventionism in the Third World went on. The coalition negotiation’s resolution took these developments into account, stressing “the policy of détente in Europa will be continued” while also cautioning that the “means, methods and limits of détente are set by its preconditions”, namely the ideological antagonism between East and West. What followed is hard not to interpret as an explicit message to critics like Brandt, Bahr and the leftwing of the SPD, warning that “already

²⁷² Quoted in Spohr, 56.

²⁷³ Spohr, 56.

²⁷⁴ „Koalitions-Spitzengespräch, 9. März 1976“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009370“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²⁷⁵ Speech by Egon Bahr, April 9. 1976: „Entspannung auch nach Süden“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009399“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²⁷⁶ Speech by Egon Bahr, April 9. 1976: „Entspannung auch nach Süden“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009399“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

²⁷⁷ Speech by Egon Bahr, April 9. 1976: „Entspannung auch nach Süden“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009399“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

achieved results and intended outcomes are thus not be measured by undue inflated expectations” (emphasis in original document).²⁷⁸ It hardly comes as a surprise, that it was the *Bremser* Genscher who had proposed the resolution.²⁷⁹ Indeed, as *Der Spiegel* had observed, “the party politician Genscher has long recognized that today, unlike in the first years of the Social-Liberal coalition, détente policy with the voter meets with disinterest or even skepticism”, which partly – as the magazine noted – was a result of the “extensive expectations” Brandt and Bahr had stoked with their rhetoric.²⁸⁰ The resolution furthermore highlighted the multilateralization of *Ostpolitik* and détente, stressing the need to expand détente with military aspects, through the MBFR negotiations, highlighting the Helsinki Final Act and its follow-ups meetings as “the indispensable continuation of the multilateral détente” that should thus not be “devalued”.²⁸¹

Transatlantic tensions

The decreasing ostpolitikal maneuverer room was thus not last an effect of the cooling in U.S.-Soviet relations. The Jackson-Vanik-Amendment, the Soviet offensive in the Third World and a bipartisan consensus in both the Ford and Carter administrations about the need for a more sensible détente decreased West Germany’s maneuverer room or at least put the Federal Republic in an awkward situation to decide what it valued most: its strong *Westbindung* or the merits of its *Ostpolitik*?

After Ford’s electoral loss to Carter, Schmidt had sent the defeated Ford a letter, where he praised the republican president in the highest terms: “under your leadership as President of the United States the German-American relations reached an unprecedented degree of friendship and mutual understanding for which we are truly grateful.”²⁸²

²⁷⁸ „Koalitionsgespräch am Mittwoch, den 8. Dezember 1976“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009372“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

²⁷⁹ „Koalitionsgespräch am Mittwoch, den 8. Dezember 1976“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009372“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

²⁸⁰ „Ostpolitik: Nichts mehr zu verschenken“ (*Der Spiegel*, no. 51/1975): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41343367.html> (accessed 4.5.2019).

²⁸¹ „Koalitionsgespräch am Mittwoch, den 8. Dezember 1976“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009372“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

²⁸² „Letter Schmidt to Ford 3.11.1976“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006580“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

It is safe to say that this was not the case for Schmidt's relationship with Ford's successor, Jimmy Carter, since the German-American frustrations during the Schmidt-Carter years are well-known and documented.²⁸³ Schmidt complained in his memoirs that "Carter had no knowledge of Russian history, tradition and mentality", while Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzeziński slammed Schmidt *Schnauze*, claiming that the chancellors "inability to keep his tongue under control soured American-German relations to an unprecedented degree."²⁸⁴ In fact, the specific personal problems had been there basically from early on in the Schmidt-Carter relationship and were a result of Schmidt's bluntness and undiplomatic behavior during the presidential election campaign. Already in October 1976 Karl Kaiser, an influential German scholar and social democrat, had written a letter to head of the chancellery, Klaus-Dieter Leister.²⁸⁵ In his letter, Kaiser stressed that the impression in Washington was that "Schmidt is against Carter" and noted that Schmidt's utterances so far had left a "really negative impression" that "could hurt us very much...if Schmidt did not at least come with a gesture" to Carter.²⁸⁶ The candidate's prominent foreign policy advisor (and later national security advisor) Zbigniew Brzeziński also complained to the German ambassador in the U.S., Berndt von Staden.²⁸⁷

Carter's political agenda certainly did little good to calm down the tensions either. Prior to Carter's entry, Henry Kissinger had prognosed that détente would not survive "another Angola".²⁸⁸ And indeed, the new president Carter soon made it clear that the changing international climate and the Soviet offensives in the Third World called for a different approach. In a Commencement Exercise at the University of Notre Dame in May 1977, Carter called for a global détente, stressing:

²⁸³ See for instance *The Strained Alliance*, Wiegrife and Barbara D. Heep, *Helmut Schmidt und Amerika: eine schwierige Partnerschaft* (Bouvier, 1990). Wolfgang Schollwer describes relations with Carter as being „very difficult“ in *Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik* in *Archiv des Liberalismus*, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, 28.

²⁸⁴ Quoted in Spohr, 58.

²⁸⁵ "Brief Kaiser an Leister 18.10.1976" in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006580“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

²⁸⁶ "Brief Kaiser an Leister 18.10.1976" in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006580“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

²⁸⁷ "Brief Kaiser an Schmidt 18.10.1976" in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006580“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn. Brzezinski's complain can be found in the same volume.

²⁸⁸ Fischer, 55.

*“Now, I believe in detente with the Soviet Union. To me it means progress toward peace. But the effects of detente should not be limited to our own two countries alone. We hope to persuade the Soviet Union that one country cannot impose its system of society upon another, either through direct military intervention or through the use of a client state's military force, as was the case with Cuban intervention in Angola.”*²⁸⁹

The debate, primarily initiated in West Germany by Egon Bahr, about the Neutron bomb in 1977 was in many ways the preview for the increasingly polarized debates surrounding foreign and security policy in the SPD and what would be come to be known as the “peace movement”.²⁹⁰ The debate over the neutron bomb was also interesting as it served as another reminder, how at odds Schmidt and Brandt, and thus in a larger sense Schmidt and his party, were on the questions of security policy.²⁹¹

Carter’s flip flop on the neutron bomb also served as a starting point for the feud between Carter and Schmidt. The German chancellor had invested a lot of personal capital in his fights with his own party in order to back Carter’s proposal, only for the president to postpone the decision, naively thinking this would give him some Soviet goodwill, which in Alexander Haig’s words “never happened”.²⁹² The debate about the neutron bomb was furthermore interesting because it ironically also made “the activation of our *Ostpolitik*” (*Die Aktivierung unserer Ostpolitik*) harder for the SPD and its chancellor.²⁹³ Indeed, every debate about new weapons prevented, or at least made it more difficult, to get into a second phase of *Ostpolitik* and military détente. In fact, the opposite happened in the latter half of the ‘long 1970s’ (1969-1982).

Bahr’s forays lead to significant tensions between Washington and Bonn and put Schmidt in the awkward – and impossible - situation to try to appeal simultaneously to both the Carter administration - who was pushing the neutron bomb - and his own party, where powerful politicians like Bahr opposed the bomb vehemently. Despite Schmidt’s attempts to convey, Bahr’s solo run put a strain on the alliance and brought an “anti-American spin” in the debate, as Schmidt put it in a letter

²⁸⁹ Jimmy Carter, Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/243018> (accessed 25.6.2023)

²⁹⁰ Fischer, 65. In October 1981, 300.000 Germans demonstrated for peace and against the dual track decision. When Ronald Reagan came to Germany in June 1982, 400.000 protested in Bonn against the president.

²⁹¹ Schmidt noted to Giscard: “*Willy Brandt setzte wie immer alle Hebel gegen mich in Bewegung*“. Quoted in Fischer, 66. For a thorough account on the politics of the neutron bomb, see chapter four in Colbourn’s *Euromissiles*.

²⁹² Quoted in Fischer, 67.

²⁹³ Horst Ehmke in the Bundestag in March 1977, quoted in Fischer, 66.

to Bahr.²⁹⁴ The entire debate turned out to becoming rather ironic, because it ultimately became Bahr - the man who had been appointed as *Bundesgeschäftsführer* in order to be an intermediary between Schmidt and his party as to prevent exactly these kinds of public disagreements – who turned out to be the chief troublemaker. In hindsight, Bahr revealed at the controversy over the neutron bomb, noting “I had put the Federal Government in an awkward position.”²⁹⁵

It was not only in internally squabbles with the SPD, that Schmidt encountered problems due to different strategies in how to best approach East-West relations. *Westbindung* remained the foundation for the Federal Republic’s *Ostpolitik*, especially for an Atlanticist like Schmidt, who placed high emphasis on military balance and a balanced approach to foreign affairs. In Schmidt’s view, the Carter administration was doing the exact opposite. For the chancellor, Carter’s approach towards the Soviet Union was too moralistic and confrontational. The Soviet leadership had reacted sharply to Carter’s statements about Soviet dissidents and the demarche that Cyrus Vance, the president’s secretary of state, had delivered to the Kremlin in March 1977.²⁹⁶ While Carter had insisted that “hanging tough” with the Soviets would eventually force Moscow to give concessions, the widespread media consensus in the United States was that the Carter administration had “seriously miscalculated” and “overplayed its hand”.²⁹⁷

Indeed, détente as the new containment did not work in the long term because the Soviets became more – and too - powerful during the early 1970s and thus bolder in intervening through proxy wars worldwide. Henry Kissinger’s idea that the Soviets could not have “détente and expansion at the same time” turned out to be hopeful thinking.²⁹⁸ Quite the opposite, U.S.-Soviet détente bilaterally and in Europe probably was a key component for expansion elsewhere. Furthermore, the ideological conflict at the core of the Cold War did, of course, not stop during the phase of increased negotiations and trust-building measures. As Leonid Brezhnev had put it, détente did „by no means rescind the laws of the class struggle, and it can neither revive these laws nor change them.“²⁹⁹

²⁹⁴ Letter from Schmidt to Bahr on 13.9.1978, quoted in Fischer 66.

²⁹⁵ Quoted in Fischer, 66.

²⁹⁶ Spohr, 57.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Quoted in Fischer, 54.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 55.

The decline of U.S.-Soviet détente also illustrated how dependent German *Ostpolitik* was on East-West détente overall.³⁰⁰ Contrary to the early phase during Brandt's chancellorship there were no major breakthroughs to come for the foreseeable future post Helsinki.

An ambassador's assessment

The German ambassador in Washington, Berndt von Staden, used his birthday letter to Schmidt to expand his views on a recent conversation about the current international situation he had had with the chancellor in December 1978. Von Staden argued that the issue with Carter's foreign policy was not the lack of "determination or political courage" but rather a lack of "conceptual coherence, consistency and thus predictability".³⁰¹ Likewise, the German ambassador stressed his belief that Henry Kissinger was right in his assessment that "we have entered a new phase in world politics with the events in Angola": "The attempt in the early 1970s of an integral détente failed indeed." Instead, von Staden argued, "we are moving, against our will...inescapably towards a precarious state of selective détente both regionally and functionally."³⁰² In his view, there were agreements like SALT II, the U.S.-Soviet acceptance of the status quo in Europe and nonproliferation, while on the other hand there was a continued arms race and increasing regional tensions.

For von Staden the lesson that had to be drawn from the aggressive Soviet foreign policy of the last years was that "the Soviet Union has learned that it can move pretty far" because the United States would not take a stand.³⁰³ A situation of selective détente had not been intended and posed strategic questions, von Staden expanded. Would, or should, the Federal Republic draw lessons from, for example, the U.S.-Soviet competition in the Persian Gulf, the ambassador asked? "Until 1968, Europe was the area of tension, and the Federal Republic was thus naturally sitting in the same boat than the American allies", the ambassador went on. "But is this also the case when the United States and the Soviet Union pursue a status-quo policy in Europe, but are engaging in a power struggle in other regions?" "In other words," von Staden extended, "can we discontinue our political,

³⁰⁰ Wolfgang Schollwer highlights this in great detail in: *Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik in Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, 16-33.*

³⁰¹ "Brief von Staden an Schmidt, 18. Dezember 1978" in „Bestand Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006633“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

economic, military efforts for détente in Europe because of a situation in, for example, Pakistan, Iran, or Oman comes into being that leads to serious tensions between the two superpowers?”³⁰⁴

The German ambassador in the U.S. acknowledged that there were no easy answers to these questions that were remotely satisfying from a practical point of view. But von Staden went on to stress that he believed it was necessary to forestall regional tensions even though de-escalation was not “an end in itself”. The “already achieved benefits us”, von Staden believed, and “contacts and conversations are tools in crisis management”. Furthermore, it was important to portray “predictability” and “reliability” and not to break existing agreements, the top diplomat stressed: “we do not want that the other side breaks agreements with us”. Likewise, “punitive measures are in our opinion misplaced against a world power, because it will lead to a hardening at most,” von Staden argued. “In conclusion,” the ambassador ended his letter, “like Kissinger I imagine a partial tension-filled phase for the early 80s, with potentially significant peripheral tensions between the superpowers, which would confront us with the difficult problem of a “selective détente”.”³⁰⁵

Schmidt replied in a very formal letter a month later, noting that he had read von Staden’s “profound and detailed deliberations with great interest” and that he believed that the summit in Guadeloupe had been a good first step towards the “concentrated diplomacy of the West” that the ambassador had argued for in his letter before Christmas.³⁰⁶ For Schmidt, working on a concentrated and common diplomatic effort was difficult, however, due to the involved parties’ different mindsets. While the two leaders disagreed in their priorities and at times lamented about the lack of transatlantic consultation, Schmidt did not interpret Carter’s approach as an intentional bad gesture from the American president. As the chancellor noted to West German business executives, this was not a sign of “arrogance” or “lack of good will” but rather a question of “a lack of sensitivity in the European’s circumstances”.³⁰⁷ This, then, made finding common ground ever more difficult. As Schmidt stressed, he was not afraid to act tough within a clear-defined Western strategy. But acting in the aftermath of

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ “Brief von Staden an Schmidt, 18. Dezember 1978“ in „Bestand Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006633“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³⁰⁶ “Entwurf Brief Schmidt an von Staden an Schmidt, 23. Januar 1979“ in „Bestand Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006633“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³⁰⁷ “Vermerk Schmidt Vertreter Wirtschaft Gewerkschaft 30. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008881“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

Afghanistan and the dual track decision, Schmidt feared “an accidental escalation, due to a zeal without knowledge”, which the divided Germany “could afford even less than anybody else.”³⁰⁸

The debates about selective détente did not disappear, however. In March 1979 Schmidt discussed the international situation with the SPD-leadership. The Christian democratic opposition continued to claim that détente had “failed” in the Third World, pointing to events in Angola, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Persia, Cambodia, and Laos. The SPD-leadership therefore discussed how the German government should react to these accusations. One suggestion was that the government should highlight that the developments in Africa or the Middle East had not been an “obvious success” for the Soviet Union, while the other option - which was the preferred one – proposed to argue for a selective détente, claiming that détente “so far only was concentrated on areas where the dangers would be more eruptive and explosive developments were particularly likely, meaning on one hand on the European continent and on the other hand in the direct relationship between the two superpowers.”³⁰⁹ The memorandum ended with the remark that “the success of these concentrated efforts for détente in these areas could be an example for détente attempts in other parts of the world.”³¹⁰ In essence, the SPD thus acknowledged that selective détente was a fact while calling for a global détente; a highly unlikely proposal considering Soviet interventionism in other parts of the world, not least the invasion of Afghanistan.

The selective détente approach was further highlighted in the preparations for Schmidt`s meeting with the Australian PM Fraser the next year.³¹¹ The Australian prime minister was considered a hawk and had called for a tough approach towards the Soviet after the invasion of Afghanistan. The *Auswärtiges Amt* had in its preparations advocated for stressing the necessity of a policy of de-escalation and “the necessity of a hard-headed, long-term, comprehensive and in itself consistent policy for a containment” of the Soviet Union. The West German foreign ministry questioned whether Fraser could see and understand “Western Europe`s exposure”, however, and whether he was able to differentiate between Soviet and Warsaw Pact states, who had no stake in

³⁰⁸ “Besuch saudischer Außenminister 3. März 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008892“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD).

³⁰⁹ „Vermerk über Gespräch des Bundeskanzlers, 5. März 1979“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008832“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ “Informeller Arbeitsbesuch australischer PM Fraser 5. Februar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008885“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

invading Afghanistan.³¹² Thus it was advised to “highlight the level of East-West cooperation in Europe and our interest to not gamble this away without good cause.”³¹³

This, of course, leaves us with the interesting question, what a “good cause” would have been in the West Germany definition if Soviet aggression in the Third World and military buildup in Europe did not qualify as such? Nevertheless, the West German government attempted to convince skeptical allies like Great Britain that it was necessary to strengthen the Soviet Union’s trust in détente and not to exploit troubled times. While selective détente was a fact and feature of the Cold War, it did not mean that West German concerns of a spillover effect ceased. Schmidt had in his second governmental declaration in January 1980 highlighted that “the less the will to détente is in other parts of the world, the more difficult cooperation becomes in Europe“.³¹⁴ The West German view was in other words that tensions outside of Europe influenced the state of affairs on the continent. While this was not necessarily the case for all bilateral relations, for example for Polish-German relations as the a memoranda noted, overall East-West relations suffered.³¹⁵ As the memo put it, the key task for the Schmidt-Genscher administration was thus how to balance the dilemma between not undermining the West’s solidarity on the one hand and safeguarding the “acquis de détente” on the other hand.³¹⁶ This balancing act was further complicated by the fact that “especially” the Germans had “a fundamental interest” in keeping the (bad) influence of tensions outside of Europe while also relying on the United States as its security guarantor at a time when it “turns out that the policy of detente was not and is not a flawed policy and has to prove itself in the current situation.”³¹⁷

Soviet stalling

Since his last meeting with Leonid Brezhnev in October 1974, the first after he had become chancellor, German-Soviet relations had stalled under Helmut Schmidt. It was only after the

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ PA AA, Band 133230 (Entspannungspolitik 1980-1983), Memorandum, February 11. 1980, Betr.: ”Zum Verständnis der Entspannung im Lichte der Afghanistan-Krise“

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

German-American fallout over the neutron bomb, that the Soviets became more open to another high-level meeting.

One area, where Soviet interests remained intense, was in the economic arena. The reasoning behind increasing economic cooperation was clear. As an internal memo put it during the preparation for the next meeting between Schmidt and Brezhnev: “The development and immersion of economic relations is foreign policy wise about the long-term safeguarding of détente: increasing the Soviet interest in good relations with the West.”³¹⁸ Schmidt furthermore stressed in his meetings with tycoons of German industry and banking that the timeframe for economic agreements should not be the next two or three years, but rather aim “at safety and stabilization in the political relations beyond the eventual change of the governing persons”. In other words: beyond a change of government in West Germany. Otto Graf Lambsdorff, the federal minister of economics, also highlighted that he did not “fear a German dependence on the Soviet Union” but that it might be debatable whether the size of the West German economy could lead to “a palpable contribution to the development of the SU”.³¹⁹ The director of the Chancellery’s economic-political section, Dieter Hiss, reiterated this wish in a letter to the influential businessman Otto Wolff von Amerongen a couple of days later.³²⁰

In May 1978 Brezhnev arrived in West Germany for a four-day summit. At the core of the meetings were the signing of cooperation agreements in a variety of areas such as trade, credits, and energy. The Soviets had long wanted these agreements while Helmut Schmidt also had been a proponent for expanding ties with the Soviets, if possible, in long-term agreements that spanned decades. Having served as finance minister under Brandt, Schmidt had long been a proponent of more *Osthandel*, which he both saw as a tool that gave economic and political opportunities but not least could serve as an element of stability.³²¹ As Schmidt put it in a speech in the *Bundestag*: “the economic agreement extends far beyond the range of economic affairs. It provides an orientation for the

³¹⁸ “Deutsch/sowjetische Wirtschaftskooperation 17. Oktober 1977“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008739“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³¹⁹ “Gesprächsaufzeichnung Deutsch/sowjetische Wirtschaftskooperation 18. Oktober 1977“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008739“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³²⁰ “Brief Hiss an von Amerongen 20. Oktober 1977“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008739“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³²¹ For more on how increasing trade, contacts and business with Eastern Europe was both a political tool to further stability and confidence but also was part of envisioned long-term transformations, see Angela Romano and Federico Romero (eds.), *European Socialist Regimes' Fateful Engagement with the West* (Taylor and Francis, 2021).

development of political relations in general, for long-term peaceful development which presupposes that the people in both countries acquire a permanent interest in one another's economic welfare."³²²

Two years later, Helmut Schmidt had stopped using the phrase "policy of détente" (*Entspannungspolitik*). Instead, the chancellor was now talking about the need for "military equilibrium" on which a policy of "cooperation with the East" should be based.³²³ In late June 1980, Schmidt arrived in Moscow. The visit was seen by the SPD leadership as a way to keep the conversation going and induce some calmness in a tense geopolitical situation at a time when relations between the United States and Soviets had cooled considerably post-Afghanistan and ongoing crisis in Poland. Visiting Brezhnev would also highlight the Federal Republic's "predictability and continuity". Schmidt, however, had cautioned his party that it should not set its hopes up too high for any tangible results coming out of the meeting.³²⁴ Indeed, the Chancellery had been very concerned about the optics and Schmidt's role as spokesman for West at such a turbulent time, calling both "timing and optics bad" in an internal assessment.³²⁵

While the conversations were dominated by questions of military balance, the meeting further manifested Schmidt's interest in conducting business as usual as much as possible and despite American concerns in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Building on the framework agreement from May 1978, a formal trade cooperation deal for a 25-year period was signed. While the Germans provided equipment and technology for the development of Soviet energy deposits, the Soviets agreed to supply oil and gas to the Federal Republic. The latter had become of renewed interests to Schmidt after the second oil shock had hit in 1979. The extension of trade relations at times of significant East-West tensions was not to be welcomed in Washington who had placed an embargo on technology transfers between West and East. Schmidt thus was determined not to sign the agreement himself but left it to the German ambassador. For the chancellor, however, increasing economic contacts continued to be an essential way of decreasing the risk of conflict in East-West relations. While the German boycott of the Moscow Olympics was viewed as high profile way to show solidarity with the United States, "compared to economics", Schmidt had told the Soviet

³²² Quoted in Spohr, 89-90.

³²³ Quoted in Spohr, 113.

³²⁴ „Protokoll über die Sitzung des Präsidiums am Montag 21. April 1980“ in „Sitzungen des Präsidiums 1979-1980“, Bestand SPD-Parteivorstand 2/PVEK0000130 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³²⁵ „Ihr Besuch in Moskau, 14. Mai 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006759“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

ambassador in Bonn prior to his trip to Moscow, the Olympics boycott was “merely of passing significance.”³²⁶

The year after, on November 23-24, 1981, an ailing Brezhnev came to Bonn. The general secretary’s visit was the first to the West since the invasion of Afghanistan – another sign of how much détente had deteriorated since its heyday in Helsinki six years earlier. While military affairs again were at the center of attention, economic cooperation was further extended just like it had been the year before in Moscow. Although FRG-Soviet trade had increased sixfold from 1969-1979, its overall share of West German trade remained minimal. In 1969 it had been 1.2%, in 1979 it was 2.3%.³²⁷ This time a West German consortium signed billion-dollar contracts as part of a Europe-wide deal to construct a gas pipeline from Siberia to Central Europe. While the deals were treated as commercial agreements, the Schmidt government had backed the project.³²⁸ Again, Schmidt tried to go discretely about the expansion of *Osthandel*, well aware that the United States did not approve of the Federal Republic’s ambitions and aims. In fact, the new Reagan administration tried to dissuade the Schmidt government until the last minute. Apart from doing business with a regime that the Reagan administration believed was failing and thus should not be propped up, there were also concerns about potential Soviet extortion over energy exports. Schmidt rejected these concerns of dependence, pointing out the Federal Republic would only depend on Soviet gas for 5 percent of its energy needs even though the pipeline deal meant that Bonn would double its reliance on Soviet gas. For the chancellor, the deal was part of an attempt to diversify West German energy dependence in the aftermath of two oil shocks and the perceived value of stabilizing East-West relations through trade.³²⁹

³²⁶ Spohr, 120.

³²⁷ Schmidt in Rother, *Willy Brandt*, 225.

³²⁸ Spohr, 127.

³²⁹ *Ibid.* Considering the end of the Cold War, the strategy has of course been the subject of intense debate, especially how *Osthandel* influenced the Cold War and whether the investments propped up a failing Soviet state and thus prolonged the Cold War. See for example Bartel’s *The Triumph of Broken Promises*.

Dual debates

In 1977 Willy Brandt had stressed that “détente will only be durable in the long run if the arms race is curbed.”³³⁰ As we know now, another decade would go by before this was the case. In the meantime, détente deteriorated further.

Helmut Schmidt had already in 1971 laid out his core philosophical approach to an English audience in his book *“The Balance of Power: Germany's peace policy and the super powers”*:

*“Détente in Europe is impossible without the balance provided by NATO. To maintain the balance of power is a prerequisite of an effective defence as well as of an improvement in the relations between East and West...In this context security through deterrence is one side of the coin; and the other is security through détente.”*³³¹

It was during the dual track discussions, that the rift between Schmidt and his party became most pronounced. In December 1979, after Schmidt presented his views to the party leadership, a “lengthy discussion” followed. Willy Brandt “warned against an automatism where the NATO-resolution makes the stationing of new intermediate-range weapons inevitable. No effort should be spared in the negotiation with the Soviets to make the stationing of the intermediate-range missiles redundant. Détente should not be endangered by the NATO-resolutions.”³³² It is worth to pay close attention to the underlying logic here. In Brandt’s view, it was the NATO-resolution - which obviously was a reactive political move to the Soviet’s aggressive behavior and military buildup - that apparently was the active endangering move for détente. Ironically, large parts of the SPD thus argued against the dual track decision while ignoring that the same dual track decision was only made necessary by the Soviet military buildup. The German historian Frank Fischer has put it memorably: “Without the SS-20 there would have been no dual track decision.”³³³

The Soviets were keen to exploit the SPD disagreement. In a speech in East Berlin on the 30th anniversary of GDR, Brezhnev promised the Federal Republic arms control and disarmament

³³⁰ „Parteiführerkonferenz Amsterdam, 16.-17 April 1977“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006693“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³³¹ Quoted in Spohr, 44.

³³² „Protokoll über gemeinsame Sitzung, 2. Dezember 1979“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006300“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³³³ Fischer, 107.

as part of a future SALT III if the FRG supported the dissolution of the dual track decision. Alternatively, Brezhnev warned, the dual track decision would interfere with the military balance in Europe and would constitute an attempt by NATO to gain military superiority. This, the Soviet leader argued, would expose the FRG to more risk. Presented this way, there was an obvious choice for the federal government, while in no word mentioning the Soviet military buildup that had created the imbalance in the first place. As foreign minister Gromyko put it, Bonn had “the key” to solve the problem: “a key that can be turned in two directions, either in the direction of a deepening of détente and the restraint of the arms race or in a direction against détente and a spur of the arms race.”³³⁴ The Soviets had now cleverly placed the responsibility in West German hands, the country that was most dependent on détente and most anxious for an intensification of the East-West conflict. At the same time, the Soviet talking points furthered the dispute between Schmidt and his base, especially the influential leftist Bahr/Brandt/Wehner/Ehmke-quartet. Particularly Bahr had become consumed with the risk of “a long and dangerous détente break” were it “could get chilly, pretty cold.”³³⁵ GDR leader Honecker skillfully played into Brezhnev’s propaganda as well, offering that the two German states could extend their cooperative efforts to disarmament policy, thereby acting as a stabilizing factor in Europe in the light of an alleged American “*Konfrontationspolitik*” that should not spoil over on the European continent.³³⁶

This underlying premise became a central aspect of the Schmidt-SPD split. Over the next years, the SPD leadership would repeatedly only back Schmidt’s course if one aspect of the dual track decision - the negotiating part – was given more importance than the stationing part.³³⁷ And even then influential social democrats like Egon Bahr would not buy Schmidt’s and the Western alliance’s argument that the dual track decision was necessary in order to get the Soviets to negotiate over their SS-20 fleet. Rather, as Bahr argued in 1981, the social democratic backing at the 1979 party meeting had primarily been a necessity since “we want to keep the chancellor and because we need the Americans for negotiations ... and it does not work without negotiations.”³³⁸ Bahr argued also – rather conveniently – that he neither had seen “in the minutes of our Berlin party congress in 1979 somebody who enthusiastically had agreed to the dual track decision“, or had viewed the decision as

³³⁴ Quoted in Fischer, 77.

³³⁵ Paul Lersch, „In einer Katastrophe sind wir vereint“ (*Der Spiegel*, 42/1979): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-39867108.html> (accessed 25.6.2023).

³³⁶ Fischer, 77.

³³⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

³³⁸ Quoted in Fischer, 80.

„the best opportunity to prevent the stationing of the American missiles.“³³⁹ As Frank Fischer has argued: “Berlin marked the predetermined breaking point (*Sollbruchstelle*) at which the party would have to break if a deployment were to be near. A time bomb began to tick.”³⁴⁰ The old dilemma during the Cold War, here articulated in a cable from the American embassy in Bonn in February 1981 prior to Genscher’s visit in the U.S., became ever more pronounced by the day:

*“There is no doubt that the FRG would subordinate its long-term interests in detente with the East to its primary security concerns if a crunch comes. Short of an obvious hostile posture by the Soviets toward Europe and the FRG, however (and perceptions may vary as to what would constitute such a turn), it is in the FRG’s interest to maintain as much political-economic maneuvering room in Europe as possible, while at the same time contributing where it can to containment of Soviet expansionism elsewhere.”*³⁴¹

The cable continued: while the “FRG leadership generally seeks to resist obvious Soviet wedge-driving efforts” there were “political elements in the FRG that are susceptible.”³⁴² Here, the Embassy in Bonn was most likely referring to the left-wing of the SPD while at the same timing being concerned about the “the ever fragile German psyche” as the National Security Council’s Dennis Blair put it in a memorandum ³⁴³

These assessments pose an interesting question: what would the most sensible reaction to the Soviet military buildup have been if it not the dual track decision? If, as the SPD left claimed, negotiating was of the utmost importance, on what other basis could the West have negotiated without giving the Soviets a strategic advantage? Were Bahr and his companions thinking that the Soviets would be willing to give up their advantage or just destroy their expensive SS-20’s? Regardless, their chancellor and deputy party chairman did not agree. As Schmidt had argued internally in late 1981:

³³⁹ Ibid - uttered in interviews with Tageszeitung and Welt in early October 1983.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California. Cable from Embassy Bonn, subject: “Genscher visit: possible FRG-U.S. differences in East-West relations”, February 3, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, RAC Box 12, Berlin (01/20/1981-01/21/1985) (1).

³⁴² Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California. Cable from Embassy Bonn, subject: “Genscher visit: possible FRG-U.S. differences in East-West relations”, February 3, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, RAC Box 12, Berlin (01/20/1981-01/21/1985) (1).

³⁴³ Ibid and Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (henceforward RRPL). Memorandum from Dennis Blair, subject: “translation of German Magazine Article”, September 16, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Sven F. Kramer Files, Box 90100, NATO - Countries - FRG 09/01/1981-09/17/1981.

“only the certainty that the stationing will happen will lead to negotiations. And only this certainty offers the realistic prospect of successful negotiations, which the federal government strives for.”³⁴⁴

Schmidt’s defense minister Hans Apel noted in hindsight – which of course also was rather convenient – on NATO’s dual track decision and the desired solution of the SPD, the zero option: “the SPD’s intentions were not congruent (*deckungsgleich*) with NATO’s.”³⁴⁵ The Soviets, however, were playing along with the SPD left’s proposals. Leonid Brezhnev was now arguing that the current situation made it “maybe more urgent than ever before to consolidate the political détente and to supplement it with the military détente.”³⁴⁶ Advocating for military détente in the aftermath of a military buildup was of course beneficial for the Soviets, and influential social democrats were playing in Moscow’s hands. As Alexander Haig noted, the dual track decision gave the Soviets a “four-year propaganda clock”.³⁴⁷

Karsten Voigt, the social democratic member of the *Bundestag* was echoing the Soviet talking points when he – in an obvious rebuke to Schmidt’s philosophy - stressed: “the credibility of our peace policy...is for our security even more important than the credibility of our military deterrence”.³⁴⁸ For the majority of the SPD, Schmidt’s insistence on rearmament came to be seen as a “hidden farewell to the policy of détente”.³⁴⁹ At the same time, the U.S. was increasingly viewed as more of an impediment to détente than the Soviet. For some leading social democrats like Herbert Wehner, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had been an “understandable defensive act.”³⁵⁰ The Soviets, naturally, were keen to play into these developments, noting that it was actually American foreign policy and NATO “aggression” that threatened détente.³⁵¹ These acts contributed to an impression of transatlantic dissonance, just as the Soviets wanted it. As the influential social democratic journalist Peter Bender already had noted in 1964: “every government in Moscow... (has to be) interested in a Western Europe that is split, weak and as distanced to the Americans as

³⁴⁴ „Protokoll über gemeinsame Sitzung, 17. November 1981“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006309“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³⁴⁵ Quoted in Fischer, 82, quote is from Apel 1990.

³⁴⁶ Quoted in Fischer, 82, uttered in 1980.

³⁴⁷ Quoted in Fischer, 83. Haig quote is from Alexander Haig, *Caveat: Realism, Reagan and Foreign Affairs* (New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984), 264.

³⁴⁸ Uttered in 1980, quoted in Fischer, 87.

³⁴⁹ Gunter Hofmann, "Total unfähig", aber am Ziel (Die Zeit, 20.9.2012): <https://www.zeit.de/2012/39/Helmut-Kohl-Bundeskanzler-Wahl-1982/komplettansicht> (accessed 25.6.2023).

³⁵⁰ Fisher, 89.

³⁵¹ Fritjof Meyer and Dieter Wild, „Ihr steht fast allein im Regen“ (*Der Spiegel*, 24/1980): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14322609.html> (accessed 25.6.2023).

possible.³⁵² The split within the SPD certainly played a vital role in advancing Moscow's goal. In their quest to safe détente, many social democrats arguably ended up engaging in appeasement. On the left, it became more the fear of a strong/harsh American reaction that was deemed to become the catalyst for the end of détente than Soviet military buildup and interventions. It was, as Alexander Haig memorably put it, "the fear of the Soviet fear".³⁵³

The chancellor had himself threatened to resign numerous times prior to his downfall in October 1982, for example prior to the afore mentioned 1979 party annual party meeting in West Berlin.³⁵⁴ The result was yet another compromise where Schmidt – under the slogan "*Sicherheit für die 80er Jahre*" – ended up speaking about the need for military balance, a possible American missile stationing, arms control and alliance solidarity while Brandt talked about the need to "revive détente and put it on solid footing with arms reduction."³⁵⁵ As Brandt's emphasis highlights, even Brandt was aware that détente – and *Ostpolitik* – had become stuck by the late 1970s. The more moderate wing of the SPD, here represented by Hans Apel, would after the fall of the Berlin Wall come to view the 1979 annual party meeting as yet another example that Brandt loved to speak "rather about the big picture" and "to happily omitted the confrontation with the hard realities."³⁵⁶

Apel's criticism also pointed to the interesting question why so many social democrats seemed to have such difficulties with accepting the political realities a decade after the launch of the *Neue Ostpolitik*. It was indeed remarkable that a large part of the biggest governing party in West Germany was advocating for a course that effectively would have meant downgrading the Federal Republic's alliance solidarity and being a predictable actor – something shifting FRG governments had always placed high emphasis on in discussions with Washington and Moscow. Least not forget that it was Western Europe, and especially Schmidt's West Germany, who had called for an American countermove to the Soviet military buildup throughout the late 1970s. By the early 1980s, prominent social democrats were openly campaigning against the dual track decision, even in the aftermath of the Soviet aggression in Afghanistan and the Polish Crisis.

³⁵² Quoted in Fischer, 109.

³⁵³ Ibid, 85.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 79.

³⁵⁵ Quoted in Fischer, 79.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

“Brezhnev’s buddy”?

On the last day of Schmidt’s visit in the GDR in December 1981, the Polish government imposed martial law, suspending civil liberties and rounding up Solidarity leaders. The German chancellor tried to downplay the crisis by stressing that unlike in Czechoslovakia in 1968 the Soviets had not intervened militarily. The Federal Republic believed in “strict non-intervention and non-interference”, the chancellor remarked – a rather bizarre statement in light of the obvious involvement of the Kremlin in Poland.³⁵⁷ The comments also brought Schmidt at odds with Reagan who had reacted strongly and criticized the Soviets for bearing “a heavy and direct responsibility for the repression”.³⁵⁸ It was, however, a good example of *Ostpolitik*’s the “normative deficit“, as the historian Heinrich August Winkler has put it, where German politicians, and especially social democrats, feared protests from below because they might undermine the political stability in Eastern Bloc countries they wanted to remain in good relations with.³⁵⁹

The escalation in Poland thus again highlighted the limits of *Ostpolitik* and the illusion of a ‘change through rapprochement’. As the historian Jan Behrends has argued, ironically in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, the so called “parish magazine of the church of Ostpolitik”³⁶⁰:

*“With its Ostpolitik Bonn had an instrument that made the Cold War controllable - so it seemed at least. But already by the end of the 1970s, the limits of this policy became apparent: the much-spoken change from the slogan "change through rapprochement" did not take place. On the contrary, in the Soviet sphere of power, the repression intensified, the Soviet Union arms buildup continued.”*³⁶¹

To Helmut Schmidt, however, the dramatic event in Poland “was a good occasion to stress the need for continuing contacts in times of East-West distrust.”³⁶² These comments, while completely in line with Schmidt’s general approach to East-West relations, appeared rather tone-deaf to both the British and the Americans who wondered what it might take before the Federal Republic would put its foot down in a meaningful way. Luckily for Schmidt, however, the White House’s

³⁵⁷ Quoted in Spohr 128

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Heinrich August Winkler, *Macht, Moral und Menschenrechte. Über Werte und Interessen in der deutschen Außenpolitik (Internationale Politik 4/2013)*, 116–127.

³⁶⁰ The expression is from Timothy Garton Ash: Ash, *New Ostpolitik*.

³⁶¹ Behrends, *Mythos Ostpolitik*.

³⁶² Quoted in Spohr, 128.

sanctions, banning the export of oil and gas equipment directly or indirectly to the Soviet Union, quickly united Western European leaders against the Americans, including Thatcher's Britain.³⁶³

Nevertheless, the frustration in the White House persisted. When Schmidt visited Washington in early January 1982 his actions were questioned. The chancellor who had been so keen on striking the right balance and putting solidarity with the United States first was now accused of being "lukewarm and selfish" on Poland and "Brezhnev's buddy."³⁶⁴ Semantics aside, the underlying criticism was not surprising considering the coy West German reaction to the events in Poland. Consequently, the West German delegation had to react to tense criticism in the U.S., since even the Italian communist party had been more forceful in its condemnation of the Polish regime than the Schmidt-Genscher government.³⁶⁵

"Not the end of détente but a serious setback": Afghanistan

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, while undoubtedly of importance, was not as commonly assumed the nail in the détente coffin.³⁶⁶ Afghanistan was, however, 'the mother of all crises' at the end of the 'long 1970s'. As a West German assessment noted at the time: "Afghanistan remains the main crisis that defines all other developments." At the same time, however, Afghanistan made it even more important to keep the channels of communication open: "if there is an opportunity to reduce the crisis potential between East and West through a summit, then we should also utilize it. A summit in Moscow would also ease and normalize our

³⁶³ Ibid. See also Andrea Chiampan, 'Those European Chicken Littles': Reagan, NATO, and the Polish Crisis, 1981–2, *The International History Review*, 37:4, 2015, 682-699; and Flavia Canestrini, Economic sanctions and new strategies in East-West economic relations in 1981–1982, *The International History Review*, 44:3, 2015, 682-699.

³⁶⁴ Quoted in Spohr, 128.

³⁶⁵ Spohr 128. It is curious that Spohr never attempts to actually analyze the merits of these American criticisms of Schmidt's attempt to play "the double interpreter" (ironically the title of that chapter). Wolfgang Schollwer, the influential FDP-member of the foreign office, for instance argued at the time that these attempts were successful for a short amount of time but not in the long term. See more: Wolfgang Schollwer: Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik in *Archiv des Liberalismus*, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, p. 26-27.

³⁶⁶ The idea that détente found its "preliminary end" after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is still dominant among many historians. See for example Rother who uses this exact phrase in *Willy Brandt. Neue Fragen, neue Erkenntnisse*, 16.

relations with the non-Soviet Eastern European states.” Keeping the conversation open was however neither “a mediation attempt” nor a substitute of the “direct contact between the superpowers.”³⁶⁷

The West was split in how to respond appropriately. For example, an embargo policy was not something Schmidt wanted to initiate himself but willing to back in a multilateral setting.³⁶⁸ It is interesting how Schmidt approached the situation conceptually. In a conversation with the Italian prime minister Francesco Cossiga the chancellor stressed that it was important that Afghanistan, which in Schmidt’s view had led to a conflict between the Soviets and the Third World, “did not become a conflict in the mold of the old Cold War pattern”. Rather, the West should show the Third World that it was standing by its side.³⁶⁹ The two also discussed the spectra of opinion among Western European nations with London and Paris representing the two outer poles in Schmidt’s view. The Italian prime minister stressed that the Soviet military intervention “bothered the European détente.”³⁷⁰ Schmidt responded that “we have no interest in letting the attained cooperation in Europe fall apart in a few weeks...(we should) explore the Soviets clear interest in cooperation.”³⁷¹

In a conversation with James Callaghan the next day, the chancellor repeated this belief and stressed that the superpowers should stay in contact and aim at “sober/hard-headed crisis management. Otherwise, this might lead to a chicken game.”³⁷² Schmidt also stressed his concern that Great Britain might drift too much towards the right and France too much towards the left, leaving the rest - and especially the FRG - in the middle. “The Germans with its “16 million “hostages” in the GDR have most to lose”, Schmidt stressed, “they are just like the Eastern Europeans deeply concerned and reminded of the 50s and early 1960s.”³⁷³ Callaghan replied that president Carter did not view “Afghanistan as the end of détente but as a serious setback”, which led Schmidt to respond, that the British public should be reminded that “the contemporary situation requires more Western unity and not trumpet calls.”³⁷⁴

³⁶⁷ „Gespräch mit Führern der Opposition 23.4.1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008901“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

³⁶⁸ “Vermerk Schmidt Vertreter Wirtschaft Gewerkschaft 30. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008881“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

³⁶⁹ “Vermerk Gespräch Schmidt Cossiga 21. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008884“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

³⁷⁰ “Vermerk Gespräch Schmidt Cossiga 21. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008884“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² “Vermerk Gespräch Schmidt Callaghan 22. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008884“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

In a conversation with German industry and banking tycoons the week after, the chancellor elaborated on his view of the mood in the U.S. post-Afghanistan and offered a historical analogy. The chancellor compared the current situation to the Cuba Crisis, but contrary to 1962, where the situation was diffused quickly, the tensions were building up slowly this time. While the American reaction so far had been “admirable” and not been characterized by any “kneejerk reactions”, it was the West German government’s view that the entirety of the situation had led to a complete mood change in the United States. The risk now was that both the Soviets and the Americans were acting “blindfold”; a danger that “was not small in either Washington or Moscow (Sakharov!)”.³⁷⁵ Schmidt then went on to outline his foreign policy priorities in these times of crises: “1. Solidarity with United States 2. Entente with France 3. Cooperation with Soviets and other East Bloc states.”³⁷⁶

Despite Schmidt’s staunch Atlanticism, the American reactions exposed the transatlantic rift that diverging assessments of détente had contributed to. Alexander Haig noted, it had become obvious that “detente had opened a gap between America and its allies.”³⁷⁷ Lawrence Eagleburger, Reagan’s undersecretary of state for political affairs, criticized that the Europeans apparently had forgotten that:

*“For us Americans, détente has meant not only a healing of the wounds in Europe, but also a change in Soviet behavior worldwide. We have global responsibility and therefore we have to deal with the Soviet Union not only in Europe, but worldwide. For us, détente has been a disappointment as we see the Soviets now very active in places such as deep in Ethiopia and Angola.”*³⁷⁸

Afghanistan was thus just one example – Poland another – were ostpolitikal ambitions had to come second because alliance solidarity was deemed to be more important. As Schmidt noted in a debate in the *Bundestag* in early 1980: “*our solidarity with the United States of America is the core of our security and the security of Berlin*” (emphasis in original).³⁷⁹

For an increasing part of the SPD, however, there was a different conclusion. In the most extreme view, Afghanistan was characterized as a “historical traffic accident” (*geschichtlicher Verkehrsunfall*) that – allegedly like the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 – might not disturb or

³⁷⁵ “Vermerk Schmidt Vertreter Wirtschaft Gewerkschaft 30. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008881“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Quoted in Fischer 84. See also Haig, 284.

³⁷⁸ Quoted in Fischer, 84-85, quote is from early May 1982.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 85.

doom détente but rather accelerate it. Generally, the idea on the SPD left was that events like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan actually called for more détente, not less. As Egon Bahr put it, the Soviet invasion could only mean “*Ostpolitik konsequent fortsetzen*”.³⁸⁰ Likewise, Willy Brandt distanced himself from Schmidt’s approach, which put *Westbindung* at the forefront and as a prerequisite for an expanded *Ostpolitik*. Instead, Brandt invoked Charles de Gaulle and stressed the need to “use the scope between the superpowers” as a “European middle-sized-power”.³⁸¹ While close relations with the U.S. were important, the relationship with the United States should not, in Brandt’s thinking, be a hindrance to *Ostpolitik*. For the chancellor, however, it was especially the military balance that concerned Schmidt and was the greatest danger to détente. Brandt and Bahr, on the other hand, questioned the apparent absolutism of *Westbindung* and stressed that the Federal Republic would lose influence in Moscow if it were to close with the Americans. This was a remarkable approach, totally at odds with the foundation of West German foreign policy for more than two decades, which Schmidt rejected vehemently.

Nevertheless, it became obvious throughout the latter part of the ‘long 1970s’, that the gulf between the chancellor and his cabinet on the one hand – who predominantly were concerned about the military balance, global equilibrium, and solidarity with the U.S as the foundation for *Ostpolitik* – and the SPD leadership and base at large was widening. To mention but one example: in prepared points for a speech in front of the SPD leadership in February 1976, it was highlighted that “our successful policy of rapprochement paved the way for worldwide cooperation and reconciliation especially with our neighbors in the East“ (interestingly enough, the German term used and underlined was Verständigungspolitik and not the otherwise commonly used term *Entspannungspolitik*).³⁸² Schmidt, however, added under this point: “Foundation: equilibrium of forces. Some remarks on Angola”.³⁸³

Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet invasion, Schmidt had edited a passage in his prepared New Year’s speech, which dealt with the Soviets’ interest in détente. As the

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 86.

³⁸¹ Klaus Wirtgen and Fritjof Meyer, »Möglich, daß wir in den Krieg schlittern« (Der Spiegel, 3/1980): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14316649.html> (accessed 25.6.2023). That Brandt in this context chose to refer to a former army officer and president who had initiated the “politics of grandeur” and “national independence” and withdrawn his country from NATO’s military integrated command during the early Cold War, while at the same time asserting that France as a major power should not rely on other countries, such as the United States, for its national security and prosperity is an historical irony that should not be lost on the observer.

³⁸² „Themenvorschläge und Stichworte für BK-Rede vor Parteirat (20.2.1976)“ in „Bestand Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009399“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

³⁸³ Ibid.

German journalist Hartmut Palmer entitled his story: “Schmidt edits his New Year’s speech: passage about Moscow’s desire for détente dated after invasion in Afghanistan.”³⁸⁴ In fact, the passage had become outdated long before. Cuba, Angola, and other interventions had throughout the 1970s illustrated that the Soviets had used the benefits of détente in Europe to escalate interventions in other areas. Afghanistan, which the Soviets feared might switch loyalties to the West, was just the latest example of this aggressive posture.³⁸⁵

The semantics are also interesting here. While Palmer had called the Soviet move an “invasion” in his article, Schmidt choose to only talk about Soviet “actions”, a remarkably coy statement.³⁸⁶ Schmidt’s public reaction stood in stark contrast to Jimmy Carter’s. The U.S. president had in his televised address on January 4th 1980 called the intervention “a serious threat to peace” and recalled the American ambassador from Moscow, imposed sanctions and deferred the ratification of SALT II.³⁸⁷ Carter’s message was clear: actions have consequences and, as the president had put it in his address, it should be clear that it was not possible to “continue to do business as usual with the Soviet Union” post-Afghanistan.³⁸⁸

This, however, was what many in the Federal Republic desired. The chorus among leading social democrats was that détente had become even more important in the aftermath of Afghanistan.³⁸⁹ The desire also went to the heart of another aspect of West German détente in the era of *Ostpolitik*. While leading social democrats like Brandt, Bahr, Schmidt and also FDP chairman Genscher were calling for a “global détente” and maintained that détente should be “indivisible“, they were not willing to give up on détente in Europe.³⁹⁰ As Schmidt declared: “we will not permit ten years of détente and defense policy to be destroyed.”³⁹¹ At its core, German leaders were not willing to punish the Soviets significantly for its actions outside Europe because they feared Moscow’s repercussions at home. While constantly calling for the need of a global détente between the superpowers amidst “the arc of crisis” as it was called in Washington, German leaders at the same

³⁸⁴ Spohr, 110.

³⁸⁵ Peter Baker, Why Did Soviets Invade Afghanistan? Documents Offer History Lesson for Trump (*New York Times*, 29.1.2019): <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/us/politics/afghanistan-trump-soviet-union.html> (accessed 25.6.2023).

³⁸⁶ Spohr, 110

³⁸⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ The stance was rather contradictory since the Soviet’s clearly had ignored the “spirit” of détente with their actions.

³⁹⁰ At the same time, the FDP argued straightforward at the party congress in 1981 that crises in other parts of the world must not endanger the results of détente in Europe. See more: *Leitrantrag in Archiv des Liberalismus*, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, 007-009, 11.

³⁹¹ Quoted in Spohr, 111.

time were thinking in Eurocentric terms. As Schmidt put it, he did not want a “Third World conflict to be turned into an East-West conflict.”³⁹²

Helmut Schmidt told the American ambassador Walter Stoessel that he would follow “two basic principles”: solidarity with the United States and keeping open lines of communication with Moscow.³⁹³ While insisting on a future visit to Moscow, Schmidt lived by his principles and went to Washington first. At the same time, however, the chancellor was not convinced that American sanctions in order to “punish” the Soviets were sensible solutions.³⁹⁴ What did the Carter administration “wish to achieve” with them, he asked Cyrus Vance in February?³⁹⁵ Fearing a further escalation of tensions, Schmidt was vigorous about the need for U.S.-Soviet dialogue and, more broadly, East-West dialogue. In times of (external) crisis, the reasoning was, it was even more important to prevent that Europe turned into a crisis zone like the continent had done during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Talking thus became an aim in itself.³⁹⁶ At the same time, Schmidt aimed to show solidarity with the United States, the other of his “two basic principles”. Part of this exercise was supporting the proposed American boycott of the Moscow Olympics even though the chancellor was concerned that a West German boycott “would undermine ten years of normalization efforts with both East Berlin and the Kremlin”.³⁹⁷ Consequently, Schmidt was also aware not to expand relations with China significantly, stressing in meetings with bankers and union chiefs that the government “is playing the china card reservedly” to not give the Soviets the impression that “we are working together with the Chinese against them.”³⁹⁸

The difficult balancing act between a fear of pushing Moscow away while at the same time appeasing the Carter administration exposed how limited the maneuver room still was for a country that had become one of the world’s most powerful throughout the ‘long 1970s’. Indeed, Helmut Schmidt felt uneasy about supporting American aims he did not find meaningful himself. In

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ The view was shared in the foreign office and amongst the German foreign policy elite. See Wolfgang Schollwer: *Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik in Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, p. 29.*

³⁹⁵ Quoted in Spohr, 111.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ “Vermerk Schmidt Vertreter Wirtschaft Gewerkschaft 30. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008881“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn. For a good recent examination of the Federal Republic’s China policy see Martin Albers, “Business with Beijing, détente with Moscow: West Germany’s China policy in a global context, 1969–1982” (*Cold War History*, 14:2, 2014), 237-257.

its most extreme, this unease was articulated by a high-ranking German official at the time who lamented: “Now we have the Finlandization of the Federal Republic”.³⁹⁹

Is détente dead?

As leftist social democrats would lament retrospectively, Schmidt might have been “the best CDU-chancellor...the SPD ever contrived.”⁴⁰⁰ The complaint was hardly a coincidence. The SPD had also at the time been very aware of the tension between Schmidt and his base on the one hand and moderate voters on the other hand who liked Schmidt but not the party in the runup to the 1980 federal election. Government spokesman Klaus Bölling even came up with a proposal, which was accepted by Schmidt, that the chancellor would use his press conferences to stress that “he is a social democrat, not could be untied from the social democrats, and recommend that the many voters who appreciate him as chancellor (favorability ratings) to vote for him and thus the SPD.”⁴⁰¹

The SPD went into the 1980 election campaign with a clear goal: the deformation of the Christian democratic chancellor candidate Franz Josef Strauß. A key component of this strategy was portraying the CSU-chief as a Cold War warrior who supposedly would be a threat to peace. Likewise, the SPD’s coalition partner, the FDP portrayed Strauß as a “indefensible risk”.⁴⁰² As Egon Bahr put it retrospectively, the underlying calculation was clear and simple: “1. It cannot be difficult to have to decide between Schmidt and Strauß. 2. We know how to conduct détente.”⁴⁰³ In light of this strategy, it was paramount, the Chancellery stressed, to “avoid the impression that détente is failed”.⁴⁰⁴ Ironically, Schmidt himself preferred not to use the term “détente” anymore, as his spokesman Bölling stressed in an internal meeting. That Schmidt omitted the term should be shielded

³⁹⁹ Quoted in Spohr, 112.

⁴⁰⁰ Quoted in Fischer, 89.

⁴⁰¹ „Kleine Kanzleramtstage“, September 25, 1980 in „Kleine Lage im Bundeskanzleramt – Protokolle“, Bestand SPD-Partei Vorstand 2/PVEK0000035 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴⁰² „F.D.P – Pressekonferenz „Zwischenbilanz des Wahlkampfes am 17.09.1980“ in „SPD-Partei Vorstand: Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) 1977-1980“, Bestand SPD-Partei Vorstand 2/PVEK0000412 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴⁰³ Quoted in Fischer, 91.

⁴⁰⁴ „Kleine Lage im Kanzleramt“, August 26, 1980 in „Kleine Lage im Bundeskanzleramt – Protokolle“, Bestand SPD-Partei Vorstand 2/PVEK0000035 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

from the public, the government spokesman cautioned.⁴⁰⁵ Likewise, it was paramount, the protocol showed, to prevent the impression that it was Schmidt who was “dangling after Honecker” in the attempt to schedule a new meeting with the GDR-leader. Originally Schmidt and Honecker were supposed to come together in August 1980, but the visit had been postponed because of the Polish crisis.⁴⁰⁶ In light of the overall state of East-West relations – and in many ways also an illustration of the distortion of détente during Schmidt’s reign – the chancellor did not expect any substantive to come out of the meeting. A summit was thus highly symbolic and aimed at highlighting Schmidt’s “readiness to talk without pre-conditions.”⁴⁰⁷ Indeed, the chancellor’s reasoning that “in difficult times it is necessary to talk more – and not less – with each other” was one that Schmidt would repeat over and over again in his talks with foreign leaders.⁴⁰⁸ The same logic – keeping the conversation going is even more important in times of crisis – also applied for the U.S.-Soviet dialogue, Schmidt stressed to Italian president Cossiga early 1980.⁴⁰⁹

While leading figures in the SPD like Egon Bahr wanted to go on the offensive and push the message that only the SPD could “do détente”, Schmidt appears to have been more cautious and eager not to talk too much about détente post Angola and Afghanistan and in the midst of the heated dual track debate. The divergent social democratic assessments were highlighted in a meeting in the party executive during the 1980 election campaign, where Brandt lamented that the SPD needed to explain to its supporters the party’s *Ostpolitik* and the cancelled meetings with Gierek and Honecker. Schmidt, however, lamented about the social democratic youth organization JUSO’s security policy stances, fearing that these statements could give the impression of the SPD not being sufficiently pro-American, which in Schmidt’s view could “bring the party in a difficult situation.”⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ On December 11, 1981, Schmidt and Honecker finally meet – ten years after the first formal summit between the leaders of the FRG and GDR.

⁴⁰⁷ Quoted in Spohr, 127.

⁴⁰⁸ “Gespräch SPD-Präsidium Rat der EKD 14. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008884“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴⁰⁹ “Vermerk Gespräch Schmidt Cossiga 21. Januar 1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA008884“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴¹⁰ „Protokoll über die Sitzung des Präsidiums am Montag 5. Mai 1980“ in „Sitzungen des Präsidiums 1979-1980“, Bestand SPD-Parteivorstand 2/PVEK0000130 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

Schmidt's fall

While Helmut Schmidt's attempt to conduct his version of *Ostpolitik* was complicated by international developments that contributed to the decline of détente, the main pressure came from within his own party. Throughout Schmidt's chancellorship Willy Brandt and especially Egon Bahr continued to push for their ostpolitikal conception. Their hope was summed up nicely by Bahr, who already early on in Schmidt's chancellorship had argued that he hoped that "what started is strong enough to live on without those who worked on it instantly."⁴¹¹ Even in retrospect this is a remarkable statement that deserves careful attention and scrutiny. Bahr's hope not only came to illustrate the inner-opposition and feuds between Schmidt and his party.⁴¹² For the so-called architect of *Ostpolitik* Helmut Schmidt was apparently not even part of the inner circle, "who worked on it instantly". This is noteworthy considering the fact that Schmidt had been part of the national board of the SPD (*Bundesvorstand*), chairman of the Social Democratic parliamentary party (1967-1969), deputy party chairman (1968-1983), Minister of Defense (1969–1972) and a Minister of Finance (1972–1974) before he became chancellor in May 1974. These underlying tensions between the *Ostpolitik* originalists and the – for the lack of better word - *Ostpolitik* revisionists would surface again and again. For example, in March 1981 there had been a big security debate in the SPD.⁴¹³ Even the subsequent press release could not hide the significant differences that existed between Schmidt and the party, exposed in thinly veiled disses and descriptions such as "Schmidt uttered great understanding for the concerns of those who in the meantime had familiarized themselves with the complicated matter of arms policy."⁴¹⁴ The chancellor was also not willing to be portrayed as the ostpolitikal outsider, that Egon Bahr claimed he was. As the press release noted, Schmidt "also takes the situation very serious, especially since he was one those that had contributed to initiate the peace- and détente policy."⁴¹⁵

⁴¹¹ Quoted in Fischer, 57.

⁴¹² See Frank Fischer and Jan Hansen for good dissections on the roots of these feuds.

⁴¹³ The month before, Wolfgang Schollwer had stressed towards his FDP-colleagues that "the Federal Republic probably had to expect difficult circumstances for the conduct of its Eastern relations". See more: Wolfgang Schollwer: Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik in Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, 24.

⁴¹⁴ „Mitteilung für die Presse, 19.5.1981“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006263“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

Once Egon Bahr was no longer part of the Schmidt-Genscher government, the disagreements intensified from 1976 and until the end of Schmidt's chancellorship. At times Brandt, Bahr, the former chef of the Chancellery Horst Ehmke (the ostpolitikal "specialist for everything" as Brandt called him) and Wehner (the influential leader of the SPD parliamentary party, 1969-1983) almost engaged in a form of shadow foreign policy that was not always in line with Schmidt. They were joined by other influential social democrats like Erhard Eppler and Karsten Voigt.⁴¹⁶ Schmidt was thus not only under pressure to find the right balance internationally but also nationally. The re-intensifying of U.S.-Soviet confrontation led to strong calls by the SPD left for a peace policy. The rift became especially outspoken when Schmidt asked Brandt to intervene in October 1981, prior to a massive peace demonstration in Bonn, where Eppler – a member of the SPD leadership – was scheduled to be one of the key speakers. Brandt declined to intervene and Eppler spoke.⁴¹⁷ Within his own ranks Schmidt was also criticized for showing too much solidarity with Carter. Willy Brandt even took a swipe at Schmidt, declaring "we shouldn't be more American than the Americans".⁴¹⁸

In 1981 Schmidt had argued that his party "should not be carried away by emotions".⁴¹⁹ "The only passion that social democrats could afford is the passion for reason", the chancellor had stressed.⁴²⁰ Two months later, in one of the first meetings in the party executive in 1982, Schmidt cautioned that the year 1982 would most likely decide whether the SPD maintained its ability to govern or not. If the government were to fall this could result in an SPD, which at this point had governed for almost sixteen years in a row, could become a party of "*Fundamental-Opposition*". If this were the case, West Germany would become the "appendage of other powers' politics". Schmidt also criticized that social democrats were attending demonstrations by the peace movement against the government, arguing that these party members were not considering how their participation undermined the government's credibility abroad.⁴²¹ Tellingly, the majority present at the party executive meeting rejected Schmidt's criticism and even told the chancellor "to not make it more difficult for him than it is."⁴²² Less than a year later, the social democrats were sitting on the

⁴¹⁶ Fischer, 59.

⁴¹⁷ Gottfried Niedhart, *Durch den Eisernen Vorhang: Die Ära Brandt und das Ende des Kalten Kriegs* (German Edition) (Kindle Locations 3829-3832). wbg Theiss. Kindle Edition.

⁴¹⁸ Quoted in Spohr, 112.

⁴¹⁹ „Protokoll über gemeinsame Sitzung, 17. November 1981“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006309“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Schmidt was probably right. Alexander Haig said openly in early 1982 that the U.S. would have "far fewer problems" with a Union government. Quoted in Clemens, 227, footnote 81.

⁴²² „Protokoll über die Sitzung des Parteivorstandes, 25. Januar 1982“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006310“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

opposition benches, a place they would inhabit for sixteen long years. History certainly is full of ironies.

The latter half of the 1970s confronted Helmut Schmidt with multiple intertwined challenges. As the chancellor noted in a letter to Egon Bahr in April 1977, “never since the world economic crisis in the early 1930s has domestic, foreign and economic-political policy...been so interdependent.”⁴²³ The letter to Bahr made it clear that big ostpolitikal pushes should not be expected. An isolated attempt to advance the bilateral relationship with the Soviet Union, Schmidt wrote, “could cause risks” that were difficult to calculate in terms of how other European states would react and could furthermore trigger American concerns. If this were to be the case, the chancellor warned, “this might lead domestically to the collapse of the Social-Liberal coalition.”⁴²⁴ The same was the case for relations with the GDR, especially in light of the Federal Republic’s new powerful position which “in the foreseeable future precluded” any further rapprochement with the GDR, the chancellor argued.⁴²⁵ Others in the SPD even called for more distance, arguing in letters to Brandt that the Federal Republic risked being viewed as “stragglings” after Brezhnev and Honecker and evolving into a defender of the “Soviet-position” in the MBFR-negotiations.⁴²⁶ This was however not the majority position in the SPD. As time would show, Bahr’s preferred approach was closer to the average SPD rank and file member than Schmidt’s.

Over time, the criticism became more pronounced, especially after Ronald Reagan had entered the White House in early 1981, even though Schmidt had expected a “steady and predictable foreign policy” from Reagan, as he told the United Nations secretary general Kurt Waldheim in New York two weeks after Reagan’s landslide victory over Carter.⁴²⁷

For many on the left Jimmy Carter had already been too much of a hawk – not least illustrated by his emphasis on “peace through strength”, a theme Reagan would come to be associated

⁴²³ „Brief von Schmidt an Bahr“ April 22, 1977 in „Politische Aufgaben 1977/1978, 1977“, Bestand SPD-Partei Vorstand 2/PVEK0000090 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Not to mention the odds for unification, Schmidt added. „Brief von Schmidt an Bahr“ April 22, 1977 in „Politische Aufgaben 1977/1978, 1977“, Bestand SPD-Partei Vorstand 2/PVEK0000090 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴²⁶ „Brief von C.A. WHO an W.B(randt) 25. April 1977“ in „Vorsitzender Willy Brandt – Korrespondenz und Vermerke 1976-1977“, Bestand SPD-Partei Vorstand 2/PVEK0000241 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴²⁷ „Vermerk über Gespräch Kurt Waldheim 19.11.1980“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA006762“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn

with as well – and now the new U.S. president had called for a massive arms buildup before negotiating with the Soviets.⁴²⁸ In Bonn, many leading social democrats agreed with the Soviets' concern that the "Eastern Treaties would become empty shells, (and) we would be thrown back to the status quo ante" before Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* and détente.⁴²⁹

The combination of Reagan's entrance, Schmidt's commitment to the dual track decision, a series of international crises from Poland to Afghanistan and the general decline of détente made the chancellor feel the heat both domestically and internally. The criticism became so intense that on May 17, 1981, the chancellor and SPD deputy chairman called out the left wing of his party at a *Landesparteitag* in Bavaria for failing to acknowledge who had caused the situation to deteriorate, reminding them that it was the Soviet military buildup throughout the 1970s that had forced the West to respond with the dual track decision.⁴³⁰ The chancellor also threatened to resign if the SPD did not support his course (it was neither the first nor the last time that Schmidt would threaten to resign). While Schmidt's criticism was pointed, the outbursts and resignation threats in Bavaria highlighted how large sways of his party, and the peace movement writ large, had become so preoccupied with 'saving' détente in Europe that they had become insensitive about the underlying reasons that had put détente in Europe at risk in the first place. The split was further exemplified by the fact that Brandt and Bahr held talks on their own in the East, discussing Soviet offers, thereby further undermining both the chancellor and especially the foreign minister and the FDP.⁴³¹

Through 1982 the tensions became even more pronounced. Now the left of the SPD wanted to veto the deployment of the missiles independent of whether progress was made in U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations or not. The lefts increasing radicalism was a severe blow to the Schmidt-Genscher government's yearlong and hard-fought attempts to highlight to first Carter and then Reagan how important serious arms control negotiations were for the West Germans.⁴³² Repeated attempts from Schmidt to alarm his party that blocking the deployments would "shake the foundations of the Atlantic Alliance" and "increase the likelihood of nuclear war" were not heard.⁴³³ "Reason, not emotion, has to govern strategy", Schmidt had stressed in April 1982.⁴³⁴ Six months later, his

⁴²⁸ Quoted in Spohr, 111. An arms buildup had, of course, begun under Carter.

⁴²⁹ Quoted in Clemens, 216.

⁴³⁰ Spohr, 124. Scholars like Niedhart typically gloss over the leftward drift. See for example Niedhart, *Durch den Eisernen Vorhang: Die Ära Brandt und das Ende des Kalten Kriegs* (German Edition) (Kindle Location 3847). wbg Theiss. Kindle Edition.

⁴³¹ Clemens, 216.

⁴³² Susan Colbourn's *Euromissiles* is an excellent account of these diplomatic undertakings.

⁴³³ Quoted in Spohr, 128.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

government had collapsed – to a significant degree because the chancellor had failed to exercise leadership and had been let down on several fronts. Internally, the deputy party chairman Schmidt was not only able control his own party and Willy Brandt, still SPD party chairman, and Egon Bahr, chairman of the *Unterausschusses für Abrüstung und Rüstungskontrolle* in the Bundestag, certainly made little heartfelt attempts to help Schmidt.

Governmentally, the chancellor had lost the faith of his vice chancellor and coalition partner Genscher. This development had also been underway for some time. Indeed, Genscher's domestic concerns were clearly addressed also by his own party members in talks with Schmidt and his confidants throughout the early 1980s. Günter Verheugen, the secretary general of the FDP, noted in a talk with Schmidt's head of the chancellery Manfred Lahnstein in March 1982 that there were significant disagreements within the party and dissatisfaction over the FDP's future course. Verheugen described the FDP-chairman and vice-chancellor as being "afraid" that the FDP would not clear the five percent hurdle in the next federal election and stressed that Genscher was ambiguous about whether the party should become more "Liberal-Conservative" or "Social-Liberal", which had led to "disorientation" and "infuriation" within the FDP. While the conversation was otherwise very speculative – prognosticating how the world might look in 1984 foreign policy-wise for example – there was an interesting response from Verheugen to Schmidt's remark that the chancellor might be willing to run again in 1984. This had been met with "palpable relief" in the FDP, as Verheugen noted, because this spared the party to consider whether "there can be a SPD/FDP-coalition without Helmut Schmidt?".⁴³⁵ In this light, it is of course ironic that Genscher clearly had come down on the "Social-Liberal" or "Liberal-Conservative"-question a mere six months later and - in the aftermath of a couple of bad state election results - decided that a SPD/FDP-coalition was not in the liberal parties best interest anymore even with Schmidt at the helm. The concerns were not purely domestic nor electoral, however.⁴³⁶ In fact, Genscher had also lost faith in Schmidt's ability to get the SPD on board for the dual track stationing and control the left's increasing anti-Americanism.⁴³⁷ In short, Genscher was

⁴³⁵ „Brief von Lahnstein an Schmidt, 14. März 1982“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009384“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴³⁶ Historians still disagree, whether domestic or foreign policy was decisive for the collapse of the Schmidt-Genscher government. For example, Friedrich Boll, Jan Hansen and Bernd Faulenbach put the emphasis on domestic issues, while Werner Link, Klaus Hildebrand and Tim Geiger tend towards foreign policy and particularly the dual track decision. For more see Schinze-Gerber, *Franz Josef Strauß*, 150. Marie-Louise Recker points towards both domestic and foreign policy in *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 79. Genscher points towards the dual track decision in his memoirs: Hans-Dietrich Genscher, *Erinnerungen* (Siedler Verlag, 1995), 573 and 580.

⁴³⁷ For example, in November 1981 the newly elected social democratic member of the Bundestag and future German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, argued that conversations about détente were easier to be had with the Soviet Union than

convinced – and there certainly was plenty of evidence to back the vice chancellor’s assessment at the time - that a radicalized SPD was no longer a responsible government partner.⁴³⁸

Endings

For proponents of Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr’s *Neue Ostpolitik*, the Schmidt-Genscher era with its decline of détente must have been frustrating and difficult. The Helsinki Final Act set aside, the MBFR-negotiations had stagnated, the dual track decision had been met with harsh reactions in the East, the level of *Osthandel* had declined, and the bilateral treaty phase had not been expanded.⁴³⁹ In fact, however, détente had already been in decline for some time when Brandt resigned in May 1974. Looking back in 1984, Brandt reflected in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that the development in U.S.-Soviet relations already in 1973 had made it clear to him that the policy of détente (Brandt used the term *Entspannungspolitik* in the interview) would not go as hoped back in 1970-72.⁴⁴⁰ Back then the former chancellor had also acknowledged that there was not necessarily a connection between détente and increased personal freedom in the Eastern bloc.⁴⁴¹ By the early 1980s, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, NATO’s dual track decision, and the crisis in Poland, the euphoria that had characterized *Ostpolitik*’s early phase had completely disappeared. Now the social democrats were discussing, “whether they had barked up the wrong tree with their *Ostpolitik*” (*ob sich die Ostpolitik als Holzweg erwiesen habe*) and whether *Ostpolitik* would go into the “annals of the Cold War as a reprieve, a footnote, even an illusion of the German left”, asking: “had the premises of 1969 been wrong?”⁴⁴²

The answer is, at least partly, that Brandt profited from – and skillfully managed – unusual beneficial circumstances. The Schmidt years demonstrated that Brandt had been presented with „a historically exceptional situation, a diplomatic shining hour (*Sternstunde*) in which the big lines in world history for a moment went confirm with the plans of a government party in a divided,

the U.S. because the Soviet foreign policy, in Schröder’s view, was now more “more predictable and rational” than American foreign policy.

⁴³⁸ Spohr, 129.

⁴³⁹ Wiegrefe, 102.

⁴⁴⁰ »Ich blicke nicht im Zorn zurück« (*Der Spiegel*, 20/1984): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13508457.html> (accessed 25.6.2023)

⁴⁴¹ »Es gibt ganz sicher keinen notwendigen Zusammenhang zwischen Détente und innerer Freiheit in kommunistisch regierten Ländern.« Quoted in Schmidt in Rother (eds.), *Willy Brandt*, 223-224.

⁴⁴² Fischer, 85.

foreign policy wise not sovereign middle power – only to move in a different direction soon again.”⁴⁴³ At the same time, the international environment was slowly but steady shifting in a less détente-friendly direction towards the end of Brandt’s chancellorship. The mantra for the new Social-Liberal government under Schmidt and Genscher consequently was no longer primarily ‘change through rapprochement’, as Brandt and Bahr had emphasised, but “security through normalization”.⁴⁴⁴

At the height of Brandt’s chancellorship it had become fashionable to talk about that the Cold War had “disappeared”. As the Schmidt-Genscher era showed this turned out to be wishful thinking.⁴⁴⁵ At the same time, it is important to stress though that while there were more positive assessments of the state of East-West relations in the early 1970s, most of the contemporary politicians were painfully aware that even in an era of détente the underlying tensions in East-West relations would not disappear. The overall trend was nevertheless striking. By the early 1980s, despite the increasing rhetorical tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the term Cold War was hardly used any more by decisionmakers. And if so, primarily to caution against a “fall back into the Cold War”. As Willy Brandt had put it after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: „we have to do everything humanly possible to prevent a relapse into the Cold War.“⁴⁴⁶ In fact, détente had neither transcended the Cold War nor was there a risk of ‘falling back into’ the Cold War: it was alive and well.

The task that Helmut Schmidt had to confront in the second half of the ‘long 1970s’ was momentous. In 1976, Schmidt had remarked that – in an unusual humble but very hanseatic way – that he expected his time as chancellor to become an “episode”, which hopefully would be deemed “helpful” in hindsight.⁴⁴⁷ Schmidt’s chancellorship turned out to become far more than that. West Germany’s fifth was essential in navigating “the shock of the global” and “the crisis of détente in Europe”.⁴⁴⁸ Schmidt was a guardian of stability in times of transformations, who Rudolf Augstein,

⁴⁴³ Fischer, 386.

⁴⁴⁴ Quoted in Schmidt in Rother, 224.

⁴⁴⁵ AAPD 1973, Pompidou in conversation with Brandt, June 21, 1973, 1021.

⁴⁴⁶ Wirtgen, Klaus and Fritjof Meyer. »Möglich, daß wir in den Krieg schlittern« (Der Spiegel, 3/1980): <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14316649.html> (accessed 25.6.2023).

⁴⁴⁷ SPIEGEL-Gespräche mit Helmut Schmidt: Ein SPIEGEL E-Book (German Edition) (p. 4). SPIEGEL-Verlag. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁴⁸ Ferguson, et all (eds.) and Leopoldo Nuti (eds), *The Crisis of Détente in Europe* (Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition, 2008).

publisher of *Der Spiegel*, in hindsight lauded as one of the “ten most important heads of government of the post-war period” worldwide.⁴⁴⁹

At a time when the Soviet military buildup had changed and challenged the military balance between the United States and the Soviet Union and thus also the security situation in Europe, Schmidt had to balance two vital West German interests in the face of significant international, domestic, and intraparty pressure. The United States remained the guarantor of the Federal Republics security, and West Germany’s most important ally – but at the same time the German division and status as a frontline state in the Cold War made constructive relations with the East, especially the Soviets, paramount. By then, however, *Ostpolitik* had long reached its pinnacle.⁴⁵⁰

Helmut Schmidt had stressed these challenges to his social democratic colleagues for years. Indeed, he delivered an adept phrase in his governmental declaration in 1980 that would come to neatly sum up the development of the *Neue Ostpolitik* in its post-treaty phase: “Difficulties, burdens and setbacks” (*Schwierigkeiten, Belastungen und Rückschläge*).⁴⁵¹ In the early to mid-1960s, influential social democratic thinkers like the journalist Peter Bender had argued that “détente requires military and political strength.”⁴⁵² By the end of Schmidt’s tenure, this was not the dominant position anymore. While Schmidt adhered to the Harmel Reports conception of deterrence being the necessity for détente, many social democrats – in particular powerful ones like Brandt and Bahr – had moved leftwards, thus also moving away from Brandt’s previous credo that *Ostpolitik* “can be successful only if Germany is anchored in the West”.⁴⁵³ For them, in the words of Hans Apel, *Ostpolitik* had “reinforced many in their perception that defensive efforts were outmoded and at best justified when they benefited détente”.⁴⁵⁴ Deterrence and NATO solidarity, in Frank Fischer’s words, “lost in plausibility”.⁴⁵⁵ Helmut Schmidt’s dilemma throughout much of his chancellorship therefore

⁴⁴⁹ SPIEGEL-Gespräche mit Helmut Schmidt: Ein SPIEGEL E-Book (German Edition) (pp. 4-5). SPIEGEL-Verlag. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁵⁰ Fischer, 376.

⁴⁵¹ *Plenarprotokoll 9/5 Deutscher Bundestag Stenographischer Bericht 5. Sitzung Bonn, Montag, den 24. November 1980*: <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btp/09/09005.pdf> (accessed 25.6.2023).

⁴⁵² Quoted in Fischer, 46.

⁴⁵³ This development is interesting since scholars like Niedhart have highlighted that “the new German Ostpolitik was based on NATO’s strategy as laid down in the Harmel Report, namely, the strategy of pursuing détente while maintaining a military deterrent”. Niedhart in Schulz and Schwartz (eds.), *Strained Alliance*, 24, quote on 26. At the same time, however, Niedhart advocates a linear and teleological view of the era of *Ostpolitik* which does not stand up to scrutiny. For a sophisticated and polemical critique of Niedhart and Bange’s “teleological nonsense”, see Mark Kramer’s Editor’s note in *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer 2016, 1–2.

⁴⁵⁴ Apel in interview with Fischer, 14.1.1999, Quoted in Fischer, 67.

⁴⁵⁵ Fischer, 67.

became that he in American eyes was too soft, while the SPD base – and especially the Soviets - saw him as a hardliner.⁴⁵⁶

In his letter to Egon Bahr in April 1977 - which also was sent to, among others, Willy Brandt and Herbert Wehner – Schmidt had stressed, big *ostpolitikal* pushes were not be expected, especially on the bilateral level.⁴⁵⁷ Pushing for more rapprochement unilaterally, especially towards the Soviet Union, could cause serious concerns, especially in Washington, that could lead “to the collapse of the Social-Liberal coalition.”⁴⁵⁸ In the same letter, Schmidt had highlighted the FDP-leadership’s more hardline position on vital issues such as the CSCE, Berlin, and the GDR.⁴⁵⁹ Over time, these issues were supplemented with questions of security, most outspoken of course the dual track decision. As Hans-Dietrich Genscher put it memorably in his memoirs, new problems might necessitate new parliamentary majorities.⁴⁶⁰ In the end, the “foreign and security political rift” between the FDP and the SPD – had become to pronounced, as Genscher noted in his memoirs.⁴⁶¹ “The glue binding them together”, as Niedhart had characterized the issue of foreign policy for the Brandt-Scheel coalition was no more under Schmidt and Genscher, thanks to, among others, two of the most prolific politicians of the previous Social-Liberal government, Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr.⁴⁶² Indeed, as the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* observed two weeks before the change of guard: “The first and last bond of the coalition between SPD and FDP, with which it had successfully waged three election campaigns against the Union, collapsed.”⁴⁶³ It was this balancing act, satisfying the SPD base and leadership who became more and more outspoken for a “second phase of *Ostpolitik*”, and simultaneously the more skeptical coalition partner FDP, while

⁴⁵⁶ Fischer, 67.

⁴⁵⁷ Two years later, the FDP’s Wolfgang Schollwer stressed the same to a party member, arguing that in the West, the exact opposite desire was dominant, i.e., less *Ostpolitik* and not more. Archiv des Liberalismus, Bestand Genscher, Signatur N52-281, 31.

⁴⁵⁸ „Brief von Schmidt an Bahr, 22. April 1977“ in „Politische Aufgaben 1977/1978, 1977“, Bestand SPD-Partei Vorstand 2/PVEK0000090 Bundesgeschäftsführer Egon Bahr, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

⁴⁵⁹ A valuable insight into the FDP’s pessimistic view regarding the productivity of the CSCE-process is Wolfgang Schollwer’s speech in Berlin on February 7th, 1981: Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, 16-33.

⁴⁶⁰ Quoted in Fischer, 113.

⁴⁶¹ Genscher, 573 and 580. For the same reason, it is surprising how downplayed foreign and security policy aspects are in the historiography when it comes to interpretation the end of the Social-Liberal coalition. Typically, the emphasis has been on disagreements about economic policy. Among the proponents of the primacy of economic disagreements are Jan Hansen, Bernd Faulenbach and Friedrich Boll. Historians like Tim Geiger, Werner Link and Klaus Hildebrand that foreign policy, especially the dual track decision disagreement was decisive.

⁴⁶² Niedhart in Schulz and Schwartz (eds), *Strained Alliance*, 25.

⁴⁶³ Quoted in Clemens, 230.

also remaining a staunch and loyal American ally in the light of the new security situation in Europe, that proved impossible to achieve for Schmidt.⁴⁶⁴

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the hope Schmidt had articulated in his letter to Bahr in 1977 – that the “current impairment” of U.S.-Soviet relations in the light of Carter’s human rights stance would “abate” – turned out to be just that: hope. While détente deteriorated and declined, it would however be misleading to talk about détente and *Ostpolitik* “dying” or being “over”. These characterizations are too simplistic and understate the longevity of the institutions and practices that were established – and lived on – after the initial high points of détente and *Ostpolitik* in the early years of the ‘long 1970s’. Rather, the components of antagonism and cooperation continued to characterize the Cold War and contrary to the first part of the ‘long 1970s’ - where cooperation played an outsized role - the pendulum had swung back during Schmidt’s tenure.

This interpretation consequently complicates the dominant historical interpretation of the apparent continuity from Schmidt to Kohl in the aftermath of the change of guards as we will see in the next chapters. Helmut Kohl’s entrance has generally been regarded as non-formative event in West German Cold War history - especially when compared to Adenauer’s chancellorship and *Westbindung* and Brandt’s 1969 victory and the subsequent *Neue Ostpolitik*. In the dominant interpretation, the change from Schmidt to Kohl was hardly noticeable and is typically described by one word: continuity. While I agree with some of these characterizations, as with most other sweeping generalizations, they raise more questions than they answer. In fact, the most relevant question to be asked is straightforward and, no matter how one thinks about it, should immediately highlight how unconvincing the idea of classic ‘continuity’ is: why would Genscher and the FDP have felt compelled to switch horses from Kohl to Schmidt in 1982 if that change, as the historiography claims, subsequently could be characterized by historians as classic ‘continuity’?⁴⁶⁵

The obvious answer is that the dominant interpretation in the historiography has serious flaws. Speaking of classic continuity from Schmidt to Kohl downplays the SPD’s leftward shift, especially on matters of security policy, which was a decisive reason for the end of the Social-

⁴⁶⁴ Fritz Zimmermann of the CSU had predicated in late 1980, just after the SPD-FDP governments reelection, that while the focus would be on economic disagreements, “differences could also arise on the issue of Ostpolitik”: Archiv für Christlich-Soziale Politik (ACSP), LG 1980:12, Protokoll der Sitzung am 30.10.1980, vormittags, der Klausurtagung V der CSU-Landesgruppe in Wildbad Kreuth. Karsten Voigt, a parliamentary spokesperson for the social democrats on foreign affairs in the Bundestag, had already called for a “second phase of Ostpolitik” in January 1980. See more Garton Ash, *Europe’s Name*, 313.

⁴⁶⁵ Michael Gehler speaks about „further development“ (Weiterentwicklung) in Michael Gehler, *Deutschland. Von der Teilung zur Einigung. 1945 bis heute* (Wien-Köln-Weimar, Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 66.

Liberal coalition. Helmut Schmidt's failure to get his rank and file to fall in line resulted in, as Schmidt's defense minister Hans Apel put it in his memoirs, that the party had lost its "ability to govern" (*Regierungsfähigkeit*).⁴⁶⁶ As Helmut Schmidt concluded retrospectively, his toppling was just as much brought upon him by the FDP as by his own party.⁴⁶⁷ In Hans Apel's words, Egon Bahr had "behind the scenes...successfully driven the erosion of the security political basis of the Social-Liberal coalition."⁴⁶⁸

Taking together, these domestic developments posed dangers to the core West German foreign policy doctrine of *Westbindung*, both as a principle and as the foundation for the conduct of *Ostpolitik*. Rather than speaking of 'continuity', a more nuanced interpretation of the toppling of Helmut Schmidt is therefore that the change of guards *ensured* continuity because it *prevented* a looming shift in West German foreign policy. In other words: continuity through change. As Willy Brandt had stressed in a speech in April 1976, celebrating the last ten years of social democratic foreign policy in government: "It took a long time to bestow upon our foreign policy the degree of credibility that is the foundation of our strength. We cannot allow for others to squander it."⁴⁶⁹ Six years later, the social democrats had squandered much of that hard-earned credibility and predictability away themselves.

The turbulent events in West Germany in the fall of 1982 resulted therefore in a rather paradoxical outcome. The toppling of the SPD-FDP government, the longest-serving coalition government in West Germany's Cold War history, and the subsequent return of a CDU/CSU-FDP coalition did not represent a "turn" (*Wende*) but rather represent continuity in West German foreign policy. In fact, it was exactly the need for this continuity - which Schmidt evoked in the *Bundestag* just hours before he was toppled on October 1, 1982 - that made Genscher and the FDP take the historic step to topple a West German chancellor for the first time. Paradoxically, it was Genscher's desire to ensure continuity that prompted historic change. Helmut Kohl and Hans-Dietrich Genscher went on to continue the "*sicherheitspolitische Linie*" that Schmidt's own party was not willing to support any longer, as we will see. It was thus, rather ironically, up to the Christian Democrats to ensure continuity now that Schmidt had lost both the control over the party, he represented as

⁴⁶⁶ Hans Apel, *Der Abstieg. Politisches Tagebuch 1978–1988* (Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, Stuttgart 1990), 217.

⁴⁶⁷ Helmut Schmidt, *Weggefährten – Erinnerungen und Reflexionen* (Siedler, Berlin 1996), 411.

⁴⁶⁸ Apel, 361.

⁴⁶⁹ Speech by Willy Brandt, April 9, 1976: „Zehn Jahre sozialdemokratische Außenpolitik“ in Bestand „Helmut Schmidt 1/HSAA009372“, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdsD), Bonn.

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chancellor but never as party chairman – a rather telling curiosity – and the faith of his coalition partner.

3. Crossing the ostpolitikal Rubicon: The CDU/CSU's evolution from confrontation to cooperation

This chapter will trace the development within the Christian Democrats towards ostpolitikal rapprochement during the long 1970s (1969-1982), where the Union was in parliamentary opposition.⁴⁷⁰ The primary emphasis in this chapter is going to be on the years from the mid-1970s and onwards - after the ratification of the Eastern Treaties - until the CDU/CSU's return to power in October 1982. This prioritization is due to the fact that the years before and after the ratification of the Eastern Treaties have been well covered in the existing historiography.⁴⁷¹ The same has not been the case for most of the Schmidt-Genscher era.⁴⁷² Initially, it is important to highlight, as Gottfried Niedhart has done, that all "the political parties represented in the Bundestag fundamentally advocated an East-West détente, even if their positions differed on individual issues."⁴⁷³ In other words: it was never a question of whether the CDU/CSU supported a policy of *Ostpolitik* and détente, but rather which *Ostpolitik* and détente it advocated for.

The Union's rapprochement towards a policy of cooperation was arguably as much driven by electoral losses as domestic and international developments. This evolution basically unfolded in two parts. Initially, the Christian Democrats thought that opposition to *Ostpolitik* – which, it is imperative to underline, was based on deeply rooted political beliefs - was a winning issue in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the dominant Union view, the Brandt-Scheel government would only

⁴⁷⁰ The terms Christian Democrats and Union are in this chapter – unless clearly stated otherwise – used interchangeably to describe the CDU/CSU in order to guarantee linguistic variability.

⁴⁷¹ See for example: Anselm Tiggemann, *Die CDU/CSU und die Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik 1969–72: Zur 'Innenpolitik der Aussenpolitik' der ersten Regierung Brandt/Scheel* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998); Christian Hacke, *Die Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik der CDU/CSU: Wege und Irrwege der Opposition seit 1969* (Köln: Wissenschaft und Politik, 1975); Michael Lemke, *CDU/CSU und Vertragspolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in den Jahren 1969–1975. Kontinuität und Wandel christdemokratischer Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik* (Saarbrücken 1992); Grau, *Gegen den Strom*; Werner Link: Die CDU/CSU-Fraktion und die neue Ostpolitik – in den Phasen der Regierungsverantwortung und der Opposition, 1966–1975, in: Hans-Peter Schwarz (eds.), *Die Fraktion als Machtfaktor. CDU/CSU im Deutschen Bundestag 1949 bis heute* (München 2009), 115–139, and Clemens, *Reluctant Realists*, especially part 2.

⁴⁷² Even the CDU's own recent handbook on its history, Norbert Lammert (eds.), *Handbuch zur Geschichte der CDU: Grundlagen, Entwicklungen, Positionen* (German Edition, wbg Academic. Kindle Edition) only mentions *Ostpolitik* briefly in Günter Buchstab's chapter *Die CDU in der Ära Kohl 1973–1982*. Furthermore, in a recent work on Franz Josef Strauß, Marco Gerhard Schinze-Gerber also only spends pages eight discussing the Union's ostpolitikal critiques during its opposition period. See more Schinze-Gerber, 152-159. An exception is Clay Clemens' 1989 study *Reluctant Realists*, which did not have access to the relevant archives, however. The clear exception to the rule is Timothy Garton Ash's masterful *In Europe's Name* from 1993, which has an impressive array of sources for a contemporary account.

⁴⁷³ Niedhart, *Eisernen Vorhang*, 314-315. Niedhart, then continues without addressing the Union's ostpolitikal approach at all in his introduction, though.

be a brief interlude to the Christian Democrats reign.⁴⁷⁴ During the chancellorship of Helmut Schmidt, the Union then came to the politically painful realization, that *Ostpolitik* had been lost as a political issue and thus had to be neutralized as an electoral element. Simultaneously, the Union came to terms with that *Ostpolitik* had become institutionalized both domestically and internationally.⁴⁷⁵ This “ambivalent adaption”, as Clay Clemens has aptly labelled it, was long and paved with intra-party infights even after the years from 1969-1972, which according to the historian and archivist Günter Buchstab had confronted the Union with “the greatest ordeal in its history”.⁴⁷⁶

Prelude: “Critically waiting”?

In the aftermath of the election loss in September 1969, Rainer Barzel had advocated for continuity in *Ostpolitik*, emphasizing Kurt Georg Kiesinger’s earlier agreement on the need for dialogue with the GDR and Poland during the Great Coalition (1966-1969).⁴⁷⁷ Barzel proposed focusing particularly on the issue of human rights in the Eastern Bloc.⁴⁷⁸ One year later, the former CDU foreign and defense minister Gerhard Schröder laid out a road map for potential strategies the CDU/CSU could follow in the aftermath of the initiation of the *Neue Ostpolitik*. In his statement, Schröder presented the fundamentals of the Union’s criticism, which essentially were that the *Neue Ostpolitik* was inhumane, accepting of and manifesting the German division, loosening the Federal Republic’s *Westbindung* and strengthening Moscow’s grip on Eastern Europe.⁴⁷⁹ Schröder stressed

⁴⁷⁴ As Clay Clemens has put it: “Throughout its opposition period the CDU/CSU remained largely hostile to the new policy toward the Soviet bloc... (the) hostility took different forms at different times and varied in intensity from group to group within the party. There was both unyielding resistance and more conditional opposition... (but) almost all party leaders shared suspicions of what underlay and what might follow from the Ostpolitik introduced by Chancellor Willy Brandt’s SPD-FDP governing coalition after 1969.” Clemens, *Reluctant Realists*, 1-2.

See also Udo Zolleis, *Die CDU. Der Wandel des politischen Leitbildes* (Wiesbaden, 2007) and Peter Haungs, *Die Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU) und die Christlich Soziale Union in Bayern (CSU)* in: Hans-Joachim Veen (eds.), *Christlich-demokratische und konservative Parteien in Westeuropa* (Paderborn, 1983).

⁴⁷⁵ Buchstab led for more than two decades the section Academic Services/Archive for Christian Democratic Politics at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. According to Buchstab, *Ostpolitik* became „a lever to topple the government“ during Brandt’s chancellorship. Günter Buchstab, and Denise Lindsay, *Barzel: „Unsere Alternativen für die Zeit der Opposition“*. *Die Protokolle des CDU-Bundesvorstands 1969–1973* (Droste, 2009), XII. See also Tim Geiger, *Atlantiker gegen Gaullisten: Außenpolitischer Konflikt und innerparteilicher Machtkampf in der CDU/CSU 1958-1969* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2008), 527,

⁴⁷⁶ Günter, Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen": Die Protokolle des CDU-Bundesvorstands 1973-1976* (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2015), XXXII.

⁴⁷⁷ For a thorough examination of Barzel’s political life see Kai Wambach, *Rainer Barzel. Eine Biografie* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019).

⁴⁷⁸ Schinze-Gerber, 153.

⁴⁷⁹ This was a very common Christian Democratic criticism. See for example Grau, 506.

that the Christian Democrats had opposed the Moscow Treaty because they believed that the Soviet Union had not been willing to negotiate a “constructive compromise”. Furthermore, the Christian Democrats feared that “this kind of Ostpolitik” would “loosen” the Federal Republics bonds with its Western allies, particularly the United States, while simultaneously “impeding” political and economic integration and “unity” in Europe. These more principial criticisms notwithstanding, Schröder acknowledged that the signing of the Moscow Treaty had resulted in “a certain determination” of the Federal Republic’s foreign policy, with significant ramifications for relations with the Soviet Union.⁴⁸⁰

The former foreign and defense minister presented the CDU with three options in his presentation in September 1970, a month after the signing of the Moscow Treaty:

1. “Hard rejection” of the Moscow Treaty and attempt to prevent the ratification in the Bundestag
2. “Fall in line“ with the government’s position by pointing towards the “fait accompli”
3. A course which Schröder described as “critically waiting”

Schröder then offered the potential pitfalls of the three strategies. Option one risked that the CDU would be viewed as “naysayers and “Cold warriors” by the public, limiting future cooperation with the SPD. It would also put the Christian Democrats in a delicate situation in terms of dealing with governments in both East and West once the Union were to regain government responsibility. Option two was outright dismissed by Schröder because it would make the Christian Democrats “untrustworthy” before the German public. It was thus option three that according to Schröder would “serve the interests of our country and our party most”.⁴⁸¹ If the Moscow Treaty would in fact improve relations with the Soviet Union – which it arguably did - the Union would be left to “arguments against the treaty that the majority of the people hardly would understand”, thereby putting the CDU in a “dangerous position”, Schröder warned.⁴⁸²

The former foreign minister next put forward a recommendation, which was supposed to be only of temporary relevance, since the Union was confident that it would return to government

⁴⁸⁰ Archiv für Christlich Demokratische Politik, Sankt Augustin. Archivsignatur: 07-001-1451, “Stellungnahme von Herrn Dr. Gerhard Schröder als Beitrag zur Bundesvorstandssitzung am 8.9.1970, 1-7.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Ibid. For a thorough account of the treaty see Julia Von Dannenberg, *The Foundations of Ostpolitik: The Making of the Moscow Treaty between West Germany and the USSR* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

soon again.⁴⁸³ In fact, it turned out to a blueprint for a more general discussion about the balance between principles and pragmatism that was under constant debate during the Union's thirteen years in opposition. First, critique of the Moscow Treaty was secondary compared to focusing on concessions that could be achieved. Second, Schröder stressed that domestic circumstances could dictate supporting initiatives that the CDU deemed to be "bad" but had to support in order to not endanger future political opportunities (read: return to power). Schröder himself admitted as much, advocating that "the real goal of the CDU/CSU must be to take over the leadership of the government, if somehow possible, in 1971." In that case, the Moscow Treaty could be interpreted in a way that made it a "useful tool" for a "constructive Ostpolitik."⁴⁸⁴

Initially, pragmatism and the wish to return to power thus trumped political principles. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, principles and pragmatism clashed regularly during the Union's long 1970s to the extent that a similar motto to Schröder's was articulated by the ostpolitikal hardliner and CSU-politician Fritz Zimmermann as late as 1981, stressing that while the "Union cannot bring about a change of coalition" it "must try to accelerate the process of decay."⁴⁸⁵

Barzel's dilemma

In February 1972, Walther Leisler Kiep, a member of the moderate wing of the Christian Democrats, presented the result of the Christian Democrats foreign policy commission. The commission had been tasked to address the "SPD's arguments on Ostpolitik" and propose "the answer from the CDU". It was interesting, and telling, that the report claimed that the "current federal government had inherited a 'intact international situation' in the fall of 1969." Brandt's *Ostpolitik* was allegedly an inheritance and "the détente policy of the CDU-led governments better takes into account the German interests".⁴⁸⁶ The report emphasized that "the dispute with the SPD is less about the goal of the treaties and more against the:

⁴⁸³ This was the dominant view within the CDU in its early opposition years. See also for example Rainer Barzel, *Die Tür blieb offen. Mein persönlicher Bericht über Ostverträge – Mißtrauensvotum – Kanzlersturz* (Bonn, 1998).

⁴⁸⁴ Archiv für Christlich Demokratische Politik, Sankt Augustin. Archivsignatur: 07-001-1451, "Stellungnahme von Herrn Dr. Gerhard Schröder als Beitrag zur Bundesvorstandsitzung am 8.9.1970, 1-7.

⁴⁸⁵ ACSP, LG 1981:13 „Protokoll der 16. Landesgruppensitzung am 28. September 1981“

⁴⁸⁶ As chapter one has demonstrated, the *Neue Ostpolitik* was not an inheritance from previous CDU/CSU-led governments. Archiv 07-001-1462: Argumente der SDP zur Ostpolitik, Archiv für Christlich, quote from report is on page 5.

- The hectic and dilettanteish methods, with which the current Ostpolitik is conducted,
- The false “timing” and
- The “side effects of the treaties”⁴⁸⁷

Kiep was a moderate, who supported the Eastern Treaties, which made him a controversial figure among the rank and file. Not least because Kiep was a leading voice on foreign policy for the CDU. In Kiep’s view, the Union should not only „live” with the Eastern Treaties, but “work” with them and exploit “the existing positive aspects”.⁴⁸⁸ This view was shared by leading CDU politicians like Kiesinger and Barzel, who had realized that “a fundamental opposition against Ostpolitik only would pull together the heterogenous Social-Liberal coalition.”⁴⁸⁹

Internally, Barzel was seen as being a knowledgeable and competent chairman when it came to challenging the Social-Liberal governments approach to *Ostpolitik*.⁴⁹⁰ His dilemma, however, was the same that Kiesinger had fought with, namely finding the right balance between challenging the government’s *Ostpolitik*, knowing that the Eastern Treaties were popular among the West German population, while simultaneously navigating within different ostpolitikal-factions of the CDU/CSU, where the majority was deeply suspicious of the Warsaw Pact and especially the Soviet Union. In many ways, Kiesinger had already summed up this dilemma at a board meeting in October 1967: “We want to try to establish better relations with as many eastern neighbors as possible, in order to gradually change the climate and attitude towards us, in order to help create a better order for solving our great national problems, but always with us looking at the risks of such a policy.”⁴⁹¹

Those intraparty differences were at the same time aligned when it came to the substantial disagreement about the benefits of the SPD-FDP’s *Ostpolitik*, which in short can be summarized as all pain no gain. According to the majority view in the CDU/CSU, *Ostpolitik* cemented German division – especially from a legal point of view, the Union feared - and helped consolidate the Soviet Union’s control over Eastern Europe, while at the same time opening the door for

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid, 7.

⁴⁸⁸ Quoted in Tim Szatkowski, Die CDU/CSU und die deutsch-polnischen Vereinbarungen vom Oktober 1975. Humanität oder Konfrontation? (*Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2011), 62.

⁴⁸⁹ Lammert, 299. See also Grau, 528 and Philipp Gassert, *Kurt Georg Kiesinger: 1904 – 1988; Kanzler zwischen den Zeiten* (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2006), 732-.

⁴⁹⁰ Philipp Gassert, *Die CDU in der (ersten) Großen Koalition und Opposition: Reformersische Aufbrüche unter Kiesinger und Barzel* in Lammert (eds.), 279.

⁴⁹¹ Günter Buchstab, *Kiesinger: "Wir leben in einer veränderten Welt." Die Protokolle des CDU-Bundesvorstands 1965-1969* (Droste, 2005), 668.

neutrality and weakening *Westbindung*.⁴⁹² Barzel was, however, also well aware that Brandt had support for his *Neue Ostpolitik* internationally. The CDU chairman had sent his colleague Kurt Birrenbach, an influential member of the *Bundestag*'s foreign affairs committee, on secret missions in 1971/72 to assess how Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* had been received. The results were disheartening for the Union: despite some reservations, every major German ally supported the basic idea behind Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*.⁴⁹³ Articulating a nuanced and constructive approach thus put Barzel in a delicate spot between the government and his own party on a political field where it was "difficult to beat the Nobel prize recipient Brandt".⁴⁹⁴ Few people knew this better than Barzel, who already had lost twice against Brandt within a single year in 1972, when first the vote of no confidence failed narrowly in the *Bundestag* in April, only to lose at the polls in November 1972 as well.

The fundamental question of principles versus pragmatism continued to foster intraparty disagreement. On the one hand, the election losses spoke for themselves. The question, however, was whether the losses called for a more fundamental opposition to the governments *Ostpolitik* or a constructive approach where the Union challenged the government on certain aspects of value but not more fundamentally. Alternatively, the Union could attempt to neutralize the issue for electoral reasons, acknowledging the governments inherent advantage on foreign policy and *Ostpolitik*'s domestic and international popularity and acceptance.⁴⁹⁵

Both Kiesinger and Barzel had opted for the constructive approach, taking the middle ground. This, however, had appealed neither to the considerable number of hardliners within the Union, especially within the CSU, and did it also not neutralize *Ostpolitik* as a political (and thus also electoral) disadvantage. To be fair, it must be noted, that it would not have been an easy undertaking to neutralize *Ostpolitik* as an issue. The driving force for Kiesinger and Barzel's attempt to find a middle ground between neutralizing *Ostpolitik* or fundamental opposition was likely that they were painfully aware of the intra party disagreement and especially the strength of its conservative wing, which had a deep-rooted skepticism and concern that *Ostpolitik* would lead to "permanent national division, political neutrality, diplomatic isolation, and even the triumph of socialism." These views

⁴⁹² Clemens, 128. For the legal fears in the Union see 128-129.

⁴⁹³ Kurt Birrenbach, *Meine Sondermissionen. Rückschau auf zwei Jahrzehnte bundesdeutscher Außenpolitik* (Econ, 1984).

⁴⁹⁴ Gassert in Lammert, 280.

⁴⁹⁵ See also Lemke, *CDU/CSU und Vertragspolitik*.

where prominent and widespread and increasing dissatisfaction with *Ostpolitik* according to opinion polls throughout 1973 and 1974 only emboldened the fundamentalists.⁴⁹⁶

By that time, it was up to the new party chairman, Helmut Kohl, to navigate the Union's internal factions and considering the societal changes in West Germany that according to Rainer Barzel's autopsy had resulted in the Union losing the "spiritual leadership" (*geistige Führung*) of the country.⁴⁹⁷

Kohl and the reformists

While the majority of the Union's delegation in the Bundestag continued to be pessimistic, skeptic and oftentimes outright hostile towards the *Neue Ostpolitik*, a sizable minority – among them Helmut Kohl - within primarily the CDU advocated for a more cooperative and less confrontative approach.

Kohl had been the sole candidate to replace Barzel as CDU chairman at the party conference in June 1973, where he had received an overwhelming endorsement. Born in 1930, Kohl was a teenager during World War II and was shaped strongly, in a political sense, by the Adenauer era. Contrary to many of his colleagues, Kohl's view of Germany was more detached from – but not ignorant of – the countries traumatic and barbaric past and more rooted in the decades of Christian Democratic dominance in the early Federal Republic and Cold War.⁴⁹⁸ Kohl himself often referred to this as the "grace of late birth" (*Gnade der späten Geburt*).

Kohl did not agree with conservatives like Franz Josef Strauß, who gradually envisioned a strong Federal Republic at the forefront of a united Europe, a co-superpower next to the United States. While Kohl believed deeply in European integration, he also saw the United States as an indispensable protector of Europe.⁴⁹⁹ First and foremost, however, Kohl was a pragmatist, especially when it came to foreign affairs. In his view, the Union needed to adapt to the era of détente rather than attempting to turn back the clock. This also meant that the Union needed to become less confrontational and revisionist in its rhetoric, less defined by intra-party splits, and no more attempts

⁴⁹⁶ Clemens, 4. Opinion polls are on page 147.

⁴⁹⁷ Buchstab, *Barzel*, 1087. See also Gassert in Lammert (eds.), 359.

⁴⁹⁸ Clemens, 134.

⁴⁹⁹ For more about this longstanding debate within the Union see Geiger, *Atlantiker Gegen Gaullisten*.

to topple the Social-Liberal government with whatever means necessary. Importantly, Kohl did not believe that West German voters preferred one-party governments – who could be viewed as being unstable – which naturally drew him closer to the FDP, now lead by Hans-Dietrich Genscher, than to the conservative CSU and its powerful leader Strauß.⁵⁰⁰

Moderate Christian Democrats such as Kohl were not vocal supporters of *Ostpolitik* per se and shared their colleagues' mistrust of the Soviets ambitions behind détente. They also agreed with the fundamentalists about the necessity of calling out human rights abuses, especially in the GDR, and supporting dissidents in Eastern Europe.⁵⁰¹ The moderates' main emphasis, contrary to the fundamentalists, however, was not as much on legal arguments and interpretations for future attempts of German reunification. Rather, the moderates argued for accepting the judicial (in terms of the Eastern Treaties), national (in terms of public opinion) and international (in terms of détente policies) consensus and thus realities of the Cold War by the early and mid-1970s. In their view, both domestic and international constraints and a changing international situation since the early years of the Cold War called for rapprochement. This view sharply contrasted with the most conservative members of the Union, who insisted that this was not a question of adapting but of fundamental choices: *Westbindung* or *Ostpolitik*. Either the Federal Republic emphasized and worked for increasing European integration, more German defense spending and strong U.S. support or, in the worst case, it risked Finlandization through detente. In the most extreme view, articulated by the CSU's Fritz Zimmermann in 1978, Brandt and Bahr were already “worthy of having reached the first level of the Order of Lenin.”⁵⁰²

From the moderates' point of view, the real issue was not whether the Federal Republic risked Finlandization through détente. The real risk was that the Union became an outlier within the Western alliance since countries such as the United States, France, Italy and Great Britain pursued their own versions of détente. In the moderate's outlook, *Westpolitik* and *Ostpolitik* were not mutually exclusive but complementary. Or more precise: a strong *Westpolitik* was the foundation for an offensive *Ostpolitik*. At the same time, the moderates knew that the issue of German reunification – while paramount to (West) Germans – was not a political priority for any of the aforementioned allies.

⁵⁰⁰ Clemens, 135-136 and 151. Clay Clemens has summed up the difference between Kohl and Strauß nicely, noting: “In short, Kohl and Strauss approached foreign policy the way they approached domestic politics. The CDU leader placed a premium on harmony, consensus, and trust—within the Union and within the West—while the Bavarian eagerly seized options and exploited openings to defeat his adversaries.” Quote is on page 136.

⁵⁰¹ Clemens, 139-140.

⁵⁰² Archiv für Christlich-Soziale Politik (ACSP), LG 1978:6 „Protokoll über die 138. Sitzung der CSU-Landesgruppe am 10.4.1978“.

The risk of opposing or scaling back *Ostpolitik* was thus at least threefold: The Federal Republic risked become isolated within the Western alliance and loose political leverage in shaping its allies' policy of détente, which simultaneously would be unpopular domestically. Last but not least, détente was likely to continue regardless.⁵⁰³

For these exact reasons, the moderates also preferred entering a coalition government with the FDP instead of attempting to win an outright majority themselves. They were all too well aware of the internal disputes within the CDU/CSU, where especially the later continued to argue for a reversal of the *Neue Ostpolitik* and called for more emphasis on the issue of reunification in a Union *Ostpolitik*. Such a policy of reversal would most likely have resulted in a CDU/CSU-government being isolated internationally, while at the same time casting serious doubt about the Federal Republics reliability and predictability. In other words: it would have been a lonely struggle with very little chance of succeeding, which at the same time likely would have alienated a very sizeable portion of the (West) German population and the German industry, who had established lucrative trade relations during détente, therefore also hurting the German economy.⁵⁰⁴

For the time being, the moderates continued to be outnumbered. The majority remained fundamentalists, who preferred a more confrontational approach, both ideologically and as an electoral strategy. According to the fundamentalists, it was not the lack of ostpolitikal rapprochement, which was the reason behind the Unions electoral defeats, but past ideologically indecisiveness. In their view, the Union had previously fallen into the trap of “disingenuous bipartisanship”, which especially CSU and expellee politicians continued to criticize in sharp terms.⁵⁰⁵

The fundamentalists dominated the parliamentary committees on *Deutschlandpolitik*, defense and foreign affairs that were most instrumental in shaping the Union's response to *Ostpolitik*. The conservative Karl Carstens had become head of the parliamentary group in the Bundestag - Kohl remained minister president of Rhineland-Palatinate - which signaled a more fundamentalist

⁵⁰³ Clemens, 131.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid, 4. For more on the economic dimension see Rudolph, *Wirtschaftsdiplomatie* and Kieninger, *Diplomacy beyond deterrence*.

⁵⁰⁵ Clemens, 132. Between 1945 and 1947, approximately 12-15 million people – the so-called *Vertriebenen* – came from Eastern Europe to the four occupied zones in Germany. The vast majority of them settled in the British or American zone. By 1950, its share of the population was around 15 percent and the political active expellees, particularly the *Bund der Vertriebenen*, were major opponents of the *Neue Ostpolitik* since The Eastern Treaties had been ratified against their will. Throughout the 1970s, the groups political power declined. While they still had powerful supporters in the Union's conservative wing, their agenda became more and more out of touch with the evolution in German society.

approach than his predecessor Barzel had stood for. Strauß continued to be an influential fundamentalist voice as well. The Bavarian leader opposed a strategy of winning over the FDP and called instead for a strategy of total confrontation.⁵⁰⁶ Strauß' all or nothing approach was best summed up at secret CSU leadership meeting in 1974 in Sonthofen. A transcript of the meeting leaked afterwards, which underlined that Strauß and his supporters did not see compromise as an option:

*“We must not shy away from confrontation. . . . We must always identify the others with socialism and the opposite of freedom, with the idea that. . . their policies will eventually result in the hegemony of the Soviet Union over Western Europe. . . And now to the tactics: just accuse and warn but don't offer concrete solutions.”*⁵⁰⁷

Kohl and the moderates knew, of course, that the fundamentalists pursuit of a 'doomsday'-strategy of confrontation against the new Social-Liberal government, accusing Schmidt's cabinet of lurching towards socialism was not credible. Many things could be said about the new chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who previously had been mayor of Hamburg, parliamentary chief, and from 1969 and onwards minister of defense, economics, and finance, but a socialist in sheep's clothing was hardly an accurate description. The same was the case regarding the new FDP chairman and foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who had emigrated from the GDR and in his previous post as interior minister had become known as “the brakesman” due to his frequent efforts to slow *Ostpolitik*.⁵⁰⁸ Both Schmidt and Genscher put more emphasis on *Westbindung* and European integration than Brandt and Scheel had done and were more transactional in their dealings with the East.⁵⁰⁹ Furthermore, given the fact that the bilateral phase of *Ostpolitik* had been concluded by the mid-1970s, the emphasis on the multilateral diplomacy of détente put some natural constraints on West German *Ostpolitik*. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that Schmidt and Genscher's pragmatism was in fact what moderate Christian Democrats had longed for and were more comfortable with than the confrontation and accusations of Strauß and his supporters.

⁵⁰⁶ Clemens, 132-133.

⁵⁰⁷ Quoted in *ibid*, 133.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 151-152.

⁵⁰⁹ For a good contemporary assessment see Jäger and Link *Republik im Wandel*.

Accepting or constraining *Ostpolitik*?

In Helmut Kohl's view, intra-party discussions notwithstanding, the Union was well underway in its rapprochement. In June 1974, Kohl argued that an increasing number of Christian Democrats were "arguing more differentiated and calculated in connection with *Ostpolitik* and foreign policy."⁵¹⁰ The same month, he called for a pragmatic approach at CDU leadership meeting, underlining that existing agreements had to be honored, also if they had come to pass against the Christian Democrats will:

*"We have to assume, I can only say this again, that the treaties were concluded against us and against our will, but they are the applicable law. I urge you to make your contribution, wherever you are, to ensure that in all areas, including the parliamentary group, we no longer continue to fight yesterday's battles, even in the personal sphere. As a party, we must be capable of overcoming May 1972 internally and not continually openly and externally have a grudge with those who voted in one way or another."*⁵¹¹

Accepting political realities was one thing. To articulate them coherently in a heterogenous party, which continued to be divided about the right way to proceed, was quite another. The question was, as Walter Leisler Kiep ultimately put it at the party conference in Mannheim in June 1975, where the Christian Democrats yet again attempted to articulate a vision that was to be supported by both the moderates and the fundamentalists: "Do we have enough confidence to discuss foreign policy within our own ranks?"⁵¹²

In January 1975, CDU general secretary Kurt Biedenkopf emphasized that it "obviously" had become a „urgent necessity" for the CDU to formulate binding political positions on foreign policy topics, including *Deutschlandpolitik* and *Ostpolitik*, to counter the "increasing questions" about its *Berlinpolitik*, *Deutschlandpolitik* and *Ostpolitik*.⁵¹³ According to Biedenkopf, past controversies "would not have arisen in this way" if Christian Democratic candidates had had obligatory talking points to fall back on. Not formulating binding foreign policy positions, Biedenkopf cautioned, would risk „that the speakers would stay clear of talking about foreign policy

⁵¹⁰ Quoted in Szatkowski, 75.

⁵¹¹ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 710.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 1086.

issues, omit discussion or speak their own mind, which would be just as bad”. In effect, no coherent message would be articulated from the Christian Democrats, who would be “reduced to a socio-political party.”⁵¹⁴ “The statement *pacta sunt servanda* is no sufficient substitute for such a political manual”, Biedenkopf said in closing, referring Strauß Latin mantra, which translated to “agreements must be kept.”⁵¹⁵

In one of the following *Bundesvorstand* meetings, Walter Leisler Kiep argued in a similar vein and called for moving on from the events of 1972 and instead “focus on a critique of the application and the government on the basis of the realities that have arisen in the meantime”, criticizing the Schmidt-Genscher government “where they have not taken advantage of existing opportunities” and “where they have failed in representing interests that are well based on these realities”.⁵¹⁶

The worst case, Kiep cautioned, would be to repeat past mistakes:

“I believe it would be terrible if we...would again find ourselves in an atmosphere in which individual people or groups try to come to terms with the past...either to establish that they have always been right or that others has always been wrong...I think we should draw a line.”⁵¹⁷

Drawing this line included accepting the basic *modus operandi* of U.S.-Soviet relations and thus writ large also the Cold War by the mid-1970s: the change towards antagonism and cooperation, which according to Kiep was “an important background for limitations and opportunities of our foreign policy”. At the same time, the internal balance of power had shifted in the CDU-politicians view, so the Federal Republic had to assume a bigger role in international affairs than previously: “I think that we have to consider in this connection, that the Federal Republic, despite us not wanting this, increasingly becomes the United States most important partner in Europe and the alliance.” This leadership role was particularly important in Kiep’s view because neither the French, Italians or Brits were in a position of power where they could “first have own initiatives, second represent these and third embed them in die American Ostpolitik”.⁵¹⁸ Kiep’s colleague Heinrich Köppler agreed and emphasized that it was essential that the Christian Democrats also developed

⁵¹⁴ Ibid, 1087.

⁵¹⁵ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1087.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid, 1159.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

initiatives on their own, especially establishing clear rules of “*do ut des*” – a Latin phrase meaning give and take – and an “offensive component in our policy with the Eastern Bloc”.⁵¹⁹

Five weeks before the meeting in Mannheim, the Christian Democratic leadership once again debated its future ostpolitikal course. Kiep, one of the Union’s most important voices on foreign policy, again had lengthy remarks. Contrary to other powerful CDU-politicians, Kiep believed that foreign policy would be an important topic in the upcoming 1976 election and predicted that it would be more challenging to conduct foreign policy in the years ahead than previously. Sharpening the Union’s political profile in this area was thus paramount. Bearing this in mind, Kiep’s analysis is very interesting and worth quoting at length here:

*“Foreign policy is not a suitable area for a position of fundamental opposition for the Union ahead of 1976 it seems to me due to a number of points that I want to justify in more detail. Such a fundamental confrontation with the government would only be possible if we assumed that the Union had essential and clearly definable alternatives in its foreign policy, which could be distinguished from and set aside by the current federal government. This seems to me, considering the situation (and) the limits and possibilities of the Federal Republic of Germany within the framework of international politics, not to be possible.”*⁵²⁰

Kiep, who also was the CDU’s treasurer, elaborated on this view, emphasizing that the Federal Republic was a “state, who is no nation, who is divided, as a country with an open flank” and thus was particular vulnerable to the “geopolitical voltage circle” (*weltpolitischen Spannungskreis*). At the same time, West Germany was economically so intertwined with the rest of the world that the “sovereign options for actions” (*Handlungsmöglichkeiten*) were very limited. These constraints were so powerful, that “neither the government nor the opposition has the opportunity to open up for wide-ranging political alternatives in one direction or the other.” If one were to try to ignore these geopolitical circumstances and attempt to move away from the constraints and formulate alternative foreign policy goals, Kiep cautioned, “these could during a campaign very easily lead to an extraordinary loss of reality in every foreign policy statement and thus the loss of credibility among the voters in Germany.”⁵²¹

⁵¹⁹ Ibid, 1176.

⁵²⁰ Buchstab, Kohl: “*Wir haben alle Chancen*”, 1298.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

The powerful Christian Democrat then cut to the core of his message and the Union's dilemma, relating to the painful election loss in 1972, which had validated the *Neue Ostpolitik*:

"I think that we should also remember how unexpected and how extremely problematic the diffusion of certain foreign policy facts impacted us in the final phase of the last federal election campaign. The great danger that I see is that by proposing a fundamentally diametrically path as an alternative, we are going to lapse into being an opposition far away from reality, which is going to rob us of our credibility with voters."⁵²²

Kiep's conclusion was just as much to the point but presented more pointedly: "In terms of détente and Ostpolitik...the Union cannot build up a fundamental alternative and neither can it steer the course of developments in another direction."⁵²³ Instead, the Christian Democrats should attempt to work on the basis and "within the framework of the existing agreements more energetic, convincing and better" than the Schmidt-Genscher government.⁵²⁴ This was a vague prescription at best, but it echoed the acceptance from the moderate wing of the party that the Union's opposition to the *Neue Ostpolitik* had not been a winning issue politically.

Kiep's conservative colleague Karl Carstens agreed that a "general confrontation to the government's policy" in foreign policy questions was not desirable. However, Carstens advocated that the Union should highlight some differences. Specifically, Carstens mentioned a stronger focus on emphasizing and defending moral values and human rights in the GDR and other parts of Eastern Europe, even though Carstens also acknowledged that enforcing these demands was not easy.⁵²⁵ Heinrich Windelen, who would become Federal Minister of Intra-German Relations in the 1980s - agreed with Kiep and Manfred Wörner - who subsequently would become defense minister and Secretary General of NATO - that "the battles of the past should no longer be fought. About that we have, I think, no fundamental differences of opinion."⁵²⁶ However, Windelen wondered whether it was possible to actually evaluate current events without "completely avoiding the basics, the origins

⁵²² Buchstab, Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen", 1298.

⁵²³ Ibid, 1299.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid, 1303.

⁵²⁶ Ibid, 1310.

and the causes of the current development” and stressed the importance of “interpreting” the Eastern Treaties in this “second phase of Deutschland- and Ostpolitik”.⁵²⁷

Ultimately, the attempt to adapt while at the same time attempting to build a consensus between the moderates and fundamentalists was most clearly articulated in the so-called “*Mannheimer Erklärung*”. The declaration was more attentive to foreign policy issues than previous platforms had been while at the same time attempting to find the right balance between Christian Democratic orthodoxy and flexibility on *Ostpolitik*.⁵²⁸ The CDU clearly stated that it accepted the political realities, the *Neue Ostpolitik* had resulted in, namely the Eastern Treaties, again under the slogan “*pacta sunt servanda*.”⁵²⁹ This was, as Biedenkopf had put it, no substitute for a political manual but it illustrated that the Union was well underway in its evolution from initial fundamental opposition to ambivalent cooperation.⁵³⁰ However, as Clay Clemens stressed in his classic study of the Union’s ambivalent adaption: “Taken in this way, *pacta sunt servanda* hardly implied broad adaptation to the SPD-FDP policy. Rather, fundamentalists at most argued for “saving what can be saved” by constraining Ostpolitik.”⁵³¹

The mistake on the CSCE

The same was not the case with regard to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).⁵³² While agreeing with the Schmidt-Genscher government in many regards about the Helsinki Final Act being a good multilateral element of détente, the Union feared that the Final Act would not help the West but rather consolidate the Soviet Union. This was by no means a fear that was exclusive to Christian Democrats. Similar fears voiced in the U.S. by secretary of State Henry Kissinger and allies in Europe who initially were not convinced about the importance of setting

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Clemens, 155.

⁵²⁹ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1159.

⁵³⁰ Franz Josef Strauß would later claim that Genscher actually agreed with the Union’s position that existing agreements had to be honored while also lamenting that the Eastern Treaties had been “poorly prepared, poorly negotiated and are subject to double interpretation”. ACSP, LG 1980:12, „Protokoll der Landesgruppensitzung Kreuth V am 30.10.1980, 15.30-18.15“

⁵³¹ Clemens, 129.

⁵³² For a comprehensive account see Petri Hakkarainen, *A State of Peace in Europe West Germany and the CSCE, 1966-1975* (Berghahn Books, 2011).

out a form of principles in form of a Final Act. Ultimately, however, they all agreed that Western consensus on the CSCE was critical.

The Final Act was not a treaty and thus not subject to ratification in the *Bundestag*. West German parliamentarians nevertheless agreed to deliberate the Final Act in a special Session. The discussion within the Union centered around two specific questions. The first was whether the CSCE essentially was a trojan horse: disguised as a college security measure, while in fact being part of an aggressive Soviet expansionist strategy. This discussion played into old Christian Democratic misgivings against particularly Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr about their alleged naivete about the Soviets true intentions - both Brandt and Bahr had promoted and praised the CSCE process – and false senses of security provided under the disguise of détente. At the same time, the CDU/CSU’s political priority was arms reduction talks in Vienna between the two superpowers amid a Soviet military buildup, and Soviet involvement in Indochina, Angola and Portugal, the latter a NATO-member. In short, the Union’s focus was elsewhere.

That the Soviet Union had made compromises during the CSCE negotiations was of secondary importance to the Christian Democrats. In the view of the majority in the Bundestag, the provisions of “Basket I” - the Security Dimension – regarding especially human rights and fundamental freedoms, were seen as being too acceptive of the status quo. Essentially, the Final Act was the Eastern Treaties all over again, the fundamentalists argued. Basket III, which included principles about the free movement of people and human contacts, was on the other hand being criticized by Christian Democrats for not being concrete enough.⁵³³

Ultimately, the CDU/CSU recommended a differentiated no. This meant in practice that while the Union voted against the Final Act, members from different wings of the parties could articulate their diverging thoughts in the Bundestag. These nuances notwithstanding what remained was a no to the Final Act. The rejection turned out to be erroneous, as the CSCE became “undoubtedly the greatest achievement of European détente”.⁵³⁴ In his memoirs, Helmut Kohl regretted the decision and described it as a “foreign policy mistake”.⁵³⁵ The Christian Democrats’ mistake gave the SPD ample ammunition and the opportunity to repeat over and over again that only the ruling communist

⁵³³ Clemens, 157-160.

⁵³⁴ Westad, *The Cold War*, 389.

⁵³⁵ Helmut Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1930-1982* (München: Droemer, 2004), 378.

party in Albania had been in agreement with the CDU/CSU in its opposition against the Final Act, which turned out to be “the high point of détente”.⁵³⁶

“One last major battle against the Social-Liberal Deutschland- and Ostpolitik”?

The debate over the Polish Agreements in 1975 and 1976 have been described as “one last major battle against the Social-Liberal Deutschland- and Ostpolitik.”⁵³⁷ While the characterization certainly is debatable – as this chapter demonstrates, it can also be argued that the 1980 election was the last major battle over *Deutschland-* and *Ostpolitik* even though the Union originally not intended this to be the case – the debate about the Polish Agreements was nevertheless a good example of the Union’s zigzag course that illustrated how difficult Helmut Kohl’s task was.⁵³⁸ In fact, the CDU-chairman was well aware of the challenges, telling his colleagues on September 1, 1975: “We are going to have a very difficult discussion regarding the Poland agreement”.⁵³⁹ Seven weeks later, at the board meeting on October 20, 1975, it became clear what Kohl had meant. While all board members were in favor of reconciliation with Poland, their assessment of how to do so in

⁵³⁶ The description comes from Federico Romero in *European Socialist Regimes' Fateful Engagement with the West*, p.17. Gottfried Niedhart ends his recent work on the “Brandt era and the end of the Cold War” by alleging that “in the decision-making phase in 1989, after the Berlin Wall had become not only permeable but also freely passable, Chancellor Kohl was able to invoke the CSCE resolutions that had been brusquely rejected by the Union parties in 1975.” As this chapter shows, “brusquely” is not the most suitable description for describing the Union’s decision making process regarding the Final Act. Gottfried Niedhart, *Through the Iron Curtain: The Brandt Era and the End of the Cold War* (German Edition) (Kindle Locations 3848-3849). wbg Theiss. Kindle Edition.

For the impact of the CSCE on the Cold War, see Snyder, Niedhart and Bange (eds.), Morgan and Peter and Wentker (eds.). Mark Kramer has argued the contrary, namely that “a sizable body of retrospective literature...wildly exaggerates the role of CSCE in ending the Cold War. The reality is that even though small opposition groups did emerge in the Soviet bloc in the aftermath of the Helsinki Accords, the Warsaw Pact countries undertook sweeping measures to crush the opposition. By the early 1980s, all opposition movements in the USSR and the rest of the Eastern bloc had been suppressed, and every prominent dissident (as well as many who were not prominent) was in prison or exile. The so-called Helsinki Watch groups were forcibly disbanded, and CSCE was reduced to insignificance. That is the way things would have remained had it not been for the advent of wide-ranging political liberalization in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev, which drastically changed the situation—a development in which CSCE was largely irrelevant. CSCE may have played a very small role at the margin, but it was certainly not decisive.” See more Mark Kramer, Editor’s note in *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 18, No. 3, Summer 2016, 1–2.

⁵³⁷ Szatkowski, 78.

⁵³⁸ For a comprehensive account see Szatkowski.

⁵³⁹ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1400.

practice differed considerably, with leading expellee politicians like Walter Becher, Herbert Czaja und Herbert Hupka remaining staunch opponents.

Essentially, the Polish Agreements tried to address a longstanding issue: the emigration of Germans from Poland, which Warsaw had been restricting for years. Under the agreement, Poland would agree to let 120,000 Germans to emigrate in exchange for a billion-mark trade credit plus economic compensation from the Federal Republic to Polish people who had paid into the German pension system during The Third Reich without receiving pensions. It was in many ways an ostpolitikal attempt to close yet another traumatic German window to the past.

Reconciliation with Poland had been a centerpiece of the *Neue Ostpolitik* and was generally widely supported within the CDU/CSU. In this particular case, however, the Union complained that the price of reconciliation in general and regarding human concessions in particular was too high. In their view, Poland had previously promised and not delivered on bilateral agreements and the number of Germans in Poland eligible for visas was more than double the size of 120.000 negotiated by the Schmidt-Genscher government. In short, the Christian Democrats yet again believed that a Social-Liberal government had been outmaneuvered in negotiations with the Warsaw Pact.⁵⁴⁰

Most Christian Democrats agreed that drafts of the Polish Agreement had improved considerably during the long negotiations with the Schmidt-Genscher government, but the political assessments differed considerably. Some Union members of the Bundestag supported the treaty anyways, others wanted to oppose them, while others were not primarily concerned about the substance of the agreements but about improving relations with the FDP in order to pave a way to return to the chancellery.⁵⁴¹ Carstens criticized in a leadership meeting on October 20th 1975 that West German détente policy “again and again had to be realized by handing out financial payments to various Eastern partners.”⁵⁴² Carstens also addressed the “difficult phase” and the Union’s dilemma, if it were to oppose the treaty in the Bundestag while CDU/CSU-led *Bundesländer* would be delivering the decisive votes in the Bundesrat for the Polish Agreements. The reality was – and Carstens was well aware of it - that the Union “would not be in agreement”. Carstens’s advice was thus – bearing the internal disagreement, the risk for “anti-Polish voices” in the public discussion and

⁵⁴⁰ Clemens, 160-161.

⁵⁴¹ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1727.

⁵⁴² *Ibid*, 1527.

the Union-led majority in the *Bundesrat* in mind - that the Union should engage in discussions “on a low key” and only put forward one speaker for the plenary discussion in the Bundestag; someone who could represent both sceptics and supporters within the CDU/CSU.⁵⁴³ Carstens’s proposal was backed by former foreign and defense minister Gerhard Schröder, who emphasized that a large majority in the CDU’s *Außenpolitischen Kommission der Partei* was in favor of supporting the treaties with Poland. The influential CDU-politician Richard von Weizsäcker agreed but lamented that the Christian Democrats had not had a clear Poland policy since the early 1970s.⁵⁴⁴

Someone in Bavaria did not get the message though. Franz Josef Strauß criticized the draft in harsh terms in a letter that became public October 25th. While insisting on the need for a common CDU/CSU position both for substantial and domestic reasons, Strauß scolded the agreement as “prime example of pseudo-humanity and pseudo-détente”.⁵⁴⁵ Less than two weeks later Strauß went even further and proclaimed that the Union would not be seen as being able to govern if it could not vote unanimously (and thus in line with his desired outcome). Abstaining from voting, as the Union had done with the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties, was not an option anymore. Now was the time to stand up against a government that was “drinking Krimsekt during détente orgies”, Strauß proclaimed.⁵⁴⁶

Strauß’ outburst put Helmut Kohl in a tough position. On the one hand, Kohl agreed with Strauß to a substantial extent on the substance of the Polish Agreements. On the other hand, Kohl could not accept Strauß’ attempt to de facto dictate Union foreign policy – which weakened the CDU-leader Kohl – especially because Kohl wanted to shield the dozen or so moderates, his main allies in the Union, who wanted to support the Polish Agreements on humanitarian or principial grounds. Kohl and Strauß clashed in subsequent phone conversations over the best approach to *Ostpolitik* and the CDU-leader complained about the “picture of a totally divided” Union at a subsequent meeting with the Bundestag faction.⁵⁴⁷

Strauß had indeed complicated Kohl’s task considerably as several members of the CDU-board noted in subsequent leadership meetings. Köppler noted: “I’m sure we also agree that a certain letter didn’t make the situation any easier for us, that we have no reason at all to welcome this

⁵⁴³ Ibid, 1529

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid, 1535-1540.

⁵⁴⁵ Quoted in Szatkowski, 67.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

letter.”⁵⁴⁸ Rather, the letter elevated the question in the public’s mind and made it very difficult – if not impossible – to pursue the “low key” approach that originally had been the desired CDU-approach. As Köppler put it: “We have given the topic a place in the public debate, contrary to our declared intention here, which we originally did not want to give it.”⁵⁴⁹ Arguably, this forced Kohl and the CDU’s hand. As Bernhard Vogel put it during the same board meeting: “There is bitterness...about the way, especially the form in which the letter defined us and anticipated the discussion.”⁵⁵⁰

In Richard Weizsäcker’s view, this was exactly what the CSU-leader had hoped to achieve.⁵⁵¹ Von Weizsäcker remained a proponent for the passing of the Poland Agreements. In his view, it was wrong on humanitarian, foreign policy and electoral grounds to oppose the agreements. According to von Weizsäcker, the opposition would have „more disadvantages than advantages in the run-up to the next federal election” if it voted against.⁵⁵² Rainer Barzel explained his support by referring to his experience as minister for all-German affairs in the early 1960s under Adenauer, arguing, that “criticism of miserable government policy” could not lead him towards supporting “the unbearable consequence that countrymen, who could have been freed, have to stay unfree.”⁵⁵³

Karl Carstens pointed towards both political and electoral factors and pleaded with the non-decided and supporters to consider the political and electoral consequences in the future for a Union that could not demonstrate its unity to the West German public: “It is insanely difficult to explain to our supporters and the public...how we cannot agree to a uniformly opinion...on such an important question...and this casts our leadership ability in question and doubt in my opinion.”⁵⁵⁴ An coherent opinion had been missing throughout the entire debate about the Poland Agreements, fundamentalist Alfred Dregger criticized in his subsequent comments where he also put forward a prime motivation for voting against: “(The decision) is not important for all voters, but it is very important for a share of our voters. We will not be able to do without these voters.”⁵⁵⁵

Dregger’s motivation to rally the base underlined another important reason the fundamentalist wing wanted to oppose the Polish Agreement to vote no: its desire to establish a clear

⁵⁴⁸ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1602

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 1603.

⁵⁵⁰ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1604-1605.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid*, 1606.

⁵⁵² *Ibid*.

⁵⁵³ Szatkowski, 69.

⁵⁵⁴ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1599.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 1600.

contrast with the Social-Liberal government. The stated goal for the Union in the 1976 election was to win an outright majority, which according to fundamentalists like Dregger required a more confrontational approach than moderate Christian Democrats advocated for:

“My friends, we have to see this question from the perspective of this very election, in which we have set ourselves an extremely high goal, namely, to win the absolute majority together alone against the SPD and FDP. If that is what we want, firstly we need clear alternative positions on politically relevant issues and secondly an agreement based on this alternative position. This also applies to Ostpolitik and Poland policy.

If I now start from the current situation, then I realize, firstly, both party leaders, one of them is a candidate for chancellor, and the leader of the parliamentary group vote for a no. Secondly, the expelledes... vote decisively for a no, the very large majority. Third, my experience from my meetings is that our sympathizers and supporters want a no.

...An agonized yes from our supporters is neither the basis for an alternative position nor the basis for an agreement based on that alternative position. I mean, an alternative position and agreement is only possible on the basis of a no. And the more convincingly and clearly this no is said, the better for our success. If some colleagues, prominent colleagues of ours, say yes, then that will deepen the doubts about the unity of the Union.”⁵⁵⁶

Historically, close relations with the FDP – who tended to tip the scales between the Union and the SPD – had been deemed vital for the Union and especially the CDU. Prominent Christian Democrats like Karl Carstens had observed semantic shifts in Genscher’s rhetoric about *Ostpolitik* and *détente* in early 1976, emphasizing at a board meeting in early 1976: “Lately, to my extreme astonishment, I have seen Mr. Genscher adopt the line of *Ostpolitik* that many of us have been advocating for the past six years.” Leading German magazines like *Der Spiegel* observed similar developments in the Spring of 1976.⁵⁵⁷

One could think, then, that the apparent shift in the FDP-chairman and foreign ministers’ rhetoric would strengthen the case of the moderates to lure the liberals back in government

⁵⁵⁶ Buchstab, Kohl: *“Wir haben alle Chancen”*, 1600.

⁵⁵⁷ “Die Union ist in einem Zwitterzustand“ in (DER SPIEGEL 11/1976): <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/die-union-ist-in-einem-zwitterzustand-a-5a08bd04-0002-0001-0000-000041251902> (accessed 29.1.2023).

with the Union. For ostpolitikal hardliners like Carstens, however, the lesson was the exact opposite: “I am just saying all of this to say how important the confrontation with the FDP is, and I believe we have to have this argument, which means we have to attack the FDP.”⁵⁵⁸ Confrontation once again trumped cooperation.

“A major turning point”?

Helmut Kohl’s own role in the debate about the Polish Agreements was a prime example of his delicate role as a bridge builder, follower and leader. Substantially, Kohl was in agreement with the majority of his colleagues that the Union should vote against the Poland Agreements. Not because it was effective practically since the agreements were no treaties and thus needed no ratification in the Bundestag – but on matters of principle. Practically, however, the vote over the agreements put Kohl in an inconvenient situation. While his Christian Democrats lacked the necessary power to block the agreements in the Bundestag, it had the decisive majority in the Bundesrat to stop them. Normally federal states would not use their power to block matters of foreign affairs by the West German government and Kohl was reluctant to do so, both on principial and electoral grounds. In the CDU chairman’s view it would be wrong to stop an agreement relating to foreign policy matters that the Bundesrat constitutionally speaking was not authorized to conduct on behalf of the Federal Republic. At the same time, Kohl also thought that a decisive no-vote in the Bundesrat would open the door for criticism against the Union of being irresponsible and preventing more reconciliation with Poland. Such a charge would always be political painful, but Kohl feared that it could prove to be particularly painful in an election year.

The CDU chairman’s dilemma was further complicated by the fact that powerful states, among them Franz-Josef Strauß’ Bavaria, advocated for local self-determination. Initially, Kohl agreed with Strauß on a political formula where the Union voted against the agreements in the Bundestag and the Christian Democratic leadership then ‘allowed’ local CDU/CSU-led states to make their own decision. This would effectively have meant that the Polish Agreements were to get passed. In many ways, this sounded like an ideal outcome for Kohl where he would both have manifested his

⁵⁵⁸ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1669.

protest in principle while not stopping the agreements in practice. Furthermore, Kohl would be on the same side as Strauß, thereby not risking alienating the CSU-leader further.

This time around, the challenge came from the center, however. Powerful moderates like Kiep, Schröder, von Weizsäcker and Barzel argued that it was not enough to merely let the agreements survive in the Bundesrat.⁵⁵⁹ In their view, the Union should support them, if not wholeheartedly on principle than at least pragmatically due to the importance of reconciliation with Poland – a powerful theme that was also articulated by church leaders in West Germany - and because of concrete humanitarian improvements for Germans wanting to leave the country. Supporting these viewpoints would have alienated Strauß, though, who sensed Kohl`s attempt to have it both ways and thus came out with his open letter to force Kohl`s hand. Strauß compared the Polish agreements to political extortion and threatening yet again a CSU-defection from its CDU-sister party. It was an old dilemma, that the CDU`s general secretary Bruno Heck already had summed up in 1970. Highlighting the attempts of future (CDU-led) governments to “improve relations with the East”, Heck quoted Konrad Adenauer for saying that he had been willing to “talk about much if it gave our countrymen on the other side more human freedoms”. In the very next sentence Heck then proclaimed that “freedom is indispensable. It cannot become a trade object”.⁵⁶⁰ In fact, as we know, this was exactly what human freedom became under both SPD and CDU-led governments during the Cold War.

In the end, Kohl managed to find a way out of the dilemma. After additional negotiations with the Schmidt-Genscher government, he agreed on a compromise with Strauß where a small number of moderate CDU members such as Rainer Barzel, Gerhard Schröder, Walther Leisler Kiep and Richard von Weizsäcker voted for the Polish Agreement in the Bundestag while the vast majority of Union politicians voted against them. Regarding the vote in the Bundesrat, Kohl convinced Strauß that the agreements were to be passed unanimously, which they did on March 12th, 1976.

In February, the CDU had still debated lively and controversially about how to proceed. Barzel had threatened to resign and fundamentalists had demanded that von Weizsäcker de facto resign or be degraded “to the second...or in the third line” over his desired vote of conscience.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁹ These moderates were not vital for the agreements to get passed or not, but they were paramount for Kohl`s support within the CDU.

⁵⁶⁰ Archivsignatur: 07-001-1451, Dr. Bruno Heck “An die Mitglieder des “Elferrrates”, 23.2.1970, 7.

⁵⁶¹ Szatkowski, 53. For Barzel`s repeated attempts to resign see p. 72.

Two weeks later, the Union had negotiated “significant improvements” in its discussions with the Schmidt-Genscher government.⁵⁶² It was a telling example of the CDU chairman’s pragmatism and one of the first examples, where Kohl used negotiations with Genscher to pressure Strauß into political compromises that had to be viewed as a victory for the more moderate minority of the Union.⁵⁶³ It was, as one participant put it, “a major turning point”.⁵⁶⁴

“Eine Dokumentation der Hilflosigkeit” or neutralizing *Ostpolitik*?

In June 1976, the social scientist Meinhard Miegel wrote a letter to his friend, the general secretary of the CDU, Kurt Biedenkopf, where Miegel commented on the most recent “*Aktionsprogramm zur Deutschlandpolitik*”. Miegel acknowledged that the program “certainly was an improvement compared to previous editions” and applauded the lack of “controversial political passages”, which made it suitable for publication. More interestingly, though, Miegel made some observations about the substance of the program as well, emphasizing: “I would however also like to point out, that we are not really offering alternatives to the government’s policy in our program. It is in certain ways a documentation of helplessness” (*eine Dokumentation der Hilflosigkeit*).⁵⁶⁵

One of the key challenges for the CDU/CSU in opposition was indeed to consider to which extent it wanted to propose alternatives to the government on foreign policy or just fall in line.⁵⁶⁶ To some extent, the lack of alternatives that Miegel demanded, was not surprising, considering the Schmidt-Genscher governments closer political proximity to the moderate fraction of the Christian Democrats. This in turn also meant that the criticism from the moderate wing of the Union now typically centered around a notion that can be summed up as “we would have negotiated better and firmer with the East, especially the GDR” while the fundamentalists were more categorically opposed and alleged that Brandt and Bahr were still running the governments *Ostpolitik* behind the scenes.

⁵⁶² Ibid, 55.

⁵⁶³ Clemens, 161-166. See also Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, XXXVI.

⁵⁶⁴ Quoted in Clemens, 164.

⁵⁶⁵ Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik, Sankt Augustin, Archivsignatur 07-001-1327, Schreiben Dr. Miegel an Prof. Biedenkopf, 15.6.1976.

⁵⁶⁶ See for example Zolleis and Hans-Otto Kleinmann 1969–1982, in: Winfried Becker, Günter Buchstab, et al. (eds.), *Lexikon der Christlichen Demokratie in Deutschland* (Sankt Augustin, 2002).

Helmut Kohl pursued a strategy that aimed at neutralizing foreign affairs and especially *Ostpolitik* as political and electoral disadvantages for the Union. As the correspondent from the British newspaper *The Times* observed about Kohl's stump speech on the campaign trail during the 1976 election: "almost the whole of the foreign policy and military security sections" could have been "copied verbatim from the SPD election manifesto."⁵⁶⁷

The lack of alternatives, that Miegel lamented, was thus not necessarily a terrible thing per se. Prior to the 1976 election, the CDU board had warned several times against going toe to toe with the government on foreign policy, instead preferring no „general confrontation to the government's policy"⁵⁶⁸. The debates about the Poland Agreements had furthermore laid bare what Richard von Weizsäcker already had cautioned against in a CDU-board meeting in January 1976:

*"As we must see, there are also forces among us who are of the opinion that the 1976 election campaign should in fact be conducted as a repetition of the 1972 election campaign, but this time with the opposite success and result. The other side should lie with its nose in the dust...namely the Ostpolitik. My opinion is, I agree with what Mr. Carstens said earlier, that these needs to revive the mood of 1972 will ultimately, at least not directly, have very little chance of success in 1976."*⁵⁶⁹

In the run-up to the 1976 election, the Union appeared not to be out of the touch with the majority of the West German population on foreign policy. Instead of offering clearcut alternatives, the tagline was now a so-called "more realistic approach" towards the Soviet Union and *Ostpolitik*. That détente had fallen out of favor, at least rhetorically, in the United States where President Gerald Ford had stopped using the term "détente", played well into the Union's argument too. At the same time, the Union had played a relatively constructive role in the passing of the Polish agreements, albeit after a long and bitter infight, which to some extent had resurfaced old arguments about the CDU/CSU being obstructionists. Its own version of *Ostpolitik* was still difficult to assess, as Meinhard Miegel had highlighted in his letter to Kurt Biedenkopf. In public debates, the Union's main argument was essentially that it would do a better job and have no "illusions" in its dealings with the Eastern Bloc. Despite being vague, the insistence on not wanting to turn back the ostpolitikal clock – what the Social-Liberal government referred to as entering an ostpolitikal "ice age" - but instead honoring the "letter and spirit" of the Eastern Treaties and "filling these with life", was a

⁵⁶⁷ Quoted in Clemens, 167.

⁵⁶⁸ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Wir haben alle Chancen"*, 1299.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 1788.

significant (rhetorical) turnaround.⁵⁷⁰ Whether this actually would have been a Union-led governments *Ostpolitik* had it won a majority in 1976, is, of course, difficult to say.⁵⁷¹ Electorally, though, these messages played well with a West German population that generally favored *Ostpolitik* but by the mid-1970s had become disappointed with the (lack of recent) results.⁵⁷²

The CDU/CSU came very close to winning an absolute majority of seats in the Bundestag in the 1976 election. Under the slogan of “freedom instead of socialism”, the CDU/CSU got 48,6 percent of the vote. The FDP, however, preferred to continue in a coalition with the SPD, which left the Union no other choice but to continue in opposition now with Helmut Kohl as its parliamentary leader. Even though the Union had achieved to neutralize *Ostpolitik* as an electoral disadvantage – a significant improvement compared to the 1972 election - failing yet again to return to the chancellery, resulted in further frictions with the CSU. On November 19th, 1976, the CSU voted to dismiss its faction with the CDU in the Bundestag, instead opting to go on its own. The defection was in many ways the culmination of intra-Union disagreements that were both personal and political. It was well known that CSU chairman Strauß wanted to be Union’s chancellor candidate and considered himself to be more qualified than Kohl. Politically and tactically, the two differed too. Strauß had advocated for a confrontational strategy, including harsh criticism of the FDP, and called for the establishment of the CSU as a nationwide fourth party – instead of just being on the ballot in Bavaria – while Kohl had preferred a more constructive oppositional role and working towards courting the FDP and helping bring about the end of the Social-Liberal coalition.⁵⁷³ The question of how to deal with the FDP remained the “cardinal question in the future”, as the moderate Ernst Albrecht, prime minister of Lower Saxony, put it. For moderates like Albrecht the preferred approach was “putting the chisel on the interface between the SPD and the FDP, i.e., pursuing a much more differentiated opposition policy.”⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷⁰ The FDP did not buy this turnaround, it appears. An internal document noted during the election campaign: “Contrary to the transparent obscure-tactics of some so-called liberal CDU-politicians, there are still worlds between us, especially in the area of East-West-politics to the likes of Strauß, Dregger, Filbinger or Abelein.” See more: “Die Außenpolitik im Bundestagswahlkampf 1976” in Archiv des Liberalismus, Bestand Schollwer, Signatur 12640/25, 8.

⁵⁷¹ The FDP was, again skeptical, stressing to its members during the 1976 election “not to practice a tactic of embracement with the opposition” and “only to praise individual Union-politicians as a contrast to the engaged cold warriors, who at the end of the were running the CDU/CSU”. See more: “Die Außenpolitik im Bundestagswahlkampf 1976” in Archiv des Liberalismus, Bestand Schollwer, Signatur 12640/25, 8.

⁵⁷² Clemens, 166-167.

⁵⁷³ Buchstab, Kohl: “Wir haben alle Chancen”, XXXVII.

⁵⁷⁴ Günter Buchstab, Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“ *Die Protokolle des CDU-Bundesvorstands 1976-1980* (Droste, 2018), X.

The personal and political struggle, where Strauß was a sort of „Nebenkanzlerkandidat“ - a shadow chancellor candidate - undermined Kohl's authority as the Union's sole candidate and paved the way for continued disputes after the election, even after the CSU backtracked from its attempts to go it alone.⁵⁷⁵ It was a preview of things to come, as the Union entered yet another four years of parliamentary opposition. The “dry spell” (*Durststrecke*), as Kohl has called it in the first meeting after the election, continued.⁵⁷⁶

Towards a “historic springtime”?

By the mid-1970s, *Ostpolitik* had become both more multilateral – primarily through the CSCE – and more neutralized as a political issue in West Germany. Helmut Kohl and the moderate wing of the CDU had to a great extent succeeded in taming the fundamentalist wing of the Union prior the 1976 election and thus made a major step forward in its attempt to realign with the realities of the Cold War. It was very telling in this regard that Theo Sommer of the German weekly *Die Zeit* – a staunch supporter of *Ostpolitik* – had spent a considerable amount of ink to attack the Union's approach as being deluded only to conclude that “whoever will govern in Bonn next, the foreign policy would change more in terms of personal style than in direction. The Union would, however, have to swallow a lot to accommodate to the reasons of state, as it has developed in the last couple of years.”⁵⁷⁷ Throughout the late 1970s, however, when superpower détente deteriorated, internal disputes and infights came to the forefront again. The theme of the CDU/CSU's ostpolitikal predictability and responsibility again became forefront in West German politics.

In the aftermath of the 1976 election, Kohl appeared to be in charge. After Strauß had to backtrack from his attempt to establish the CSU as the fourth major nationwide political party, Kohl was able to remove the conservative Karl Carstens as chief of the joint parliamentary group. Carstens became President of the Bundestag, while Kohl became the parliamentary leader of the CDU/CSU. The change made it easier for Kohl to enforce his flexible and constructive approach to *Ostpolitik*, which has been summed neatly as “detente should not push us on the defensive”.⁵⁷⁸ It was

⁵⁷⁵ Gassert in Lammert (eds.), 310-315.

⁵⁷⁶ Buchstab, *Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“*, IX.

⁵⁷⁷ Theo Sommer: Bilanz der Bonner Außenpolitik“ (*Die Zeit*, 27. August 1976) in Archiv des Liberalismus, Bestand Schollwer, Signatur 126940/26.

⁵⁷⁸ Quoted in Clemens, 173.

also part of wider strategy from the CDU chairman who instigated changes in powerful leadership positions in parliamentary committees on foreign affairs and *Deutschlandpolitik*. Just as he had travelled to Eastern European capitals during the 1976 election campaign, Kohl encouraging his colleagues to establish and extend contacts with officials and politicians behind the Iron Curtain, especially in the GDR. In this undertaking, Kohl found a powerful and important ally in Alois Mertes. A former diplomat in the German foreign ministry, Mertes had served in France and Moscow and been at Harvard University before running for political office. He won election to the German Bundestag for the first time in 1972 at the age of 51 and after more than twenty years in the foreign ministry. Mertes became one of the most influential foreign policy advisors to Helmut Kohl and, importantly, was well liked and respected both among Christian Democrats and FDP-politicians.⁵⁷⁹

Mertes was a moderate, who supported Kohl's idea of a constructive opposition that neutralized *Ostpolitik* as a partisan issue. Mertes declared that a government led by the Christian Democrats would be characterized by continuity and "follow its predecessor's course" and articulated the same mantra that Kohl had voiced. The Union would be a more competent counterpart for Moscow, which in Mertes' words meant remaining "calculable and reliable" while being "realistic, coherent, and balanced".⁵⁸⁰ The Eastern Treaties would not be touched but rather form "an essential component of Union policy", essentially "ending the old battles over *Ostpolitik*", which Kohl already had signaled during his 1976 campaign for chancellor.⁵⁸¹

In practice, however, this continued rapprochement was not as straightforward.⁵⁸² Kohl's own position within the Union remained precarious after not winning the chancellery back and there was still a strong fundamentalist wing – led by Kohl's deputy in the CDU/CSU faction Fritz Zimmermann - who demurred to the idea of closing the books on *Ostpolitik* and especially on *Deutschlandpolitik*.⁵⁸³ As one of them, the CDU's Werner Marx, put it: "time does not heal all things"

⁵⁷⁹ Bernhard Vogel, the former prime minister of Rhineland-Palatinate and chairman of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation has noted: "It was only consequential that Alois Mertes became state secretary in the foreign ministry for the Christian-Liberal coalition in 1982. He was at that point probably the only parliamentarian in the Union, who also had the political respect to fill out this difficult position between liberal foreign minister, power conscious chancellor and partly disappointed Union-fraction." Bernhard Vogel in Hanns Jürgen Küsters (eds), *Alois Mertes. Würdigung eines christlichen Demokraten* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2013), 11.

⁵⁸⁰ Quoted in Clemens, 173.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid*, 173-174.

⁵⁸² The FDP also remained sceptical and convinced that Strauß and his supporters would de facto be in charge and not willing to abstain from previous positions. See more Wolfgang Schollwer: *Deutschlandpolitik der CDU nach Düsseldorf* in *Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik*, A44-29, 5-15.

⁵⁸³ See for example *Der Spiegel*'s "*Falken vorn*" from February 1977: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/falken-vorn-a-79f0afaf-0002-0001-0000-000040992598> (accessed 5.3.23).

– especially not when, according to the fundamentalists, all their warnings about the dangers of the *Neue Ostpolitik* had come true.⁵⁸⁴ Other fundamentalists like Alfred Dregger continued to criticize that the CDU was not confrontational enough in its dealings with the FDP.⁵⁸⁵ On the other hand, moderates like Johann Baptist Gradl insisted on the importance of appealing to the FDP and cautioned against creating “artificial barriers” for such a future coalition, even though Gradl also acknowledged certain deutschlandpolitikal disagreements with the liberal.⁵⁸⁶

The CSU continued to go on its own, like when it issued a *Deutschlandpolitik* declaration in early 1978 that alleged that the Basic Treaty had “not changed the basic political situation” in Germany, put the GDR’s name in quotation marks and frequently described East Germany as “*Mitteldeutschland*” “the Russian-occupied zone,” and “a Soviet protectorate.”⁵⁸⁷ The CDU’s new basic program (*Grundsatzprogramm*) on the other hand was approved without much debate and defections in Ludwigshafen in October 1978 and included a – considering previous Christian Democratic attempts of revisionism - notable acknowledgement, accepting “treaties with foreign states and the GDR as binding”.⁵⁸⁸ The section on *Ostpolitik*, emphasized that the Federal Republic’s “inner strength...remains decisive for our Ostpolitik”, highlighted the importance of human contacts, stressed the desire for “fair cooperation” and “peaceful neighborhood” and a “normalization of relations”, while at the same warning that the Warsaw Pacts military buildup threatened to undermine these desires. Ultimately, *Ostpolitik* should advance the CDU’s stated goal of “a lasting and just peace that transcends the division of Europe. Only in this way can the German question, for which the Soviet Union bears a special responsibility together with the Western powers, find its just solution.”⁵⁸⁹

There was still plenty of criticism levelled against the Schmidt-Genscher government and the Union continued to stress the importance of symbolism in intra-German relations, for example regarding retaining the traditional national anthem and the importance of focusing on German history in school curriculums. At the same time, however, many Union politicians had moved towards a more pragmatic and constructive opposition role, highlighting the importance of human rights enshrined in

⁵⁸⁴ Quoted in Clemens, 175.

⁵⁸⁵ Buchstab, “Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“, XI.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid, 542.

⁵⁸⁷ Quoted in Clemens, 176.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ „Grundsatzprogramm der Christlich Demokratischen Union Deutschlands verabschiedet auf dem 26.

Bundesparteitag Ludwigshafen, 23.-25. Oktober 1978”:

https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1978_Grundsatzprogramm_Ludwigshafen.pdf/6ab8ab48-871d-52a2-a603-989c928e127f (accessed 5.3.23). The section about Ostpolitik is on pp. 59-60.

Basket III of the Final Act and improving the lives of Germans in the GDR. As Helmut Kohl had put it in a leadership meeting in January 1977:

*“All I can say is that we must now, I believe, seize an opportunity, namely that the CDU is increasingly becoming the advocate for human rights, and that, with the basic idea of protecting human rights, we are now turning our attention particularly to the issues that are connected to Deutschland- and Ostpolitik. I am thinking of the development of the harassment in East Berlin, I am thinking of all the questions that are now arising throughout the so-called Eastern bloc as a result of the use of the CSCE. Here we do in fact have an opportunity to represent our position very soberly, without forcefulness and without a cold warrior perspective...and so I believe win many friends out in the country for our politics.”*⁵⁹⁰

The principles of tougher negotiating, more preconditions for West German investment and generally more quid pro quo were a sharp break with the previous “all or nothing”-opposition and ambition to dismantle the GDR of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was an approach, where the aim according to Kohl was not “looking backwards - this is not about reckoning with Brandt's Ostpolitik – but...taking stock of the situation now and what we can do about it in the future.”⁵⁹¹ As the German newspaper *Die Zeit* observed: “Just as the Union once shifted the accent a bit from the demand for reunification and self-determination to the protection of legal positions, now it is indisputable that it is beginning to shift the emphasis to something new: from legal positions to human rights.”⁵⁹²

Even members of the fundamentalist wing started to soften their views. As Manfred Abelein put it:

*“It is not our task to overthrow [SED chief] Honecker. . . . Naturally, we need him. If we want to soften the German division and achieve relief for the people in Germany, naturally we need Honecker, who must also deal [with us]. . . . Herr Honecker has his set of interests, and we have ours. We have to bring these two things together.”*⁵⁹³

The same pragmatic approach was visible in the aftermath of Leonid Brezhnev’s 1978 visit in Bonn. The Soviet leader had met both Kohl and Strauß and the Bavarian leader made the most

⁵⁹⁰ Buchstab, Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“, 289.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid, 333.

⁵⁹² Quoted in Clemens, 178.

⁵⁹³ Ibid, 180.

if it, proclaiming in the Bundestag that a CDU/CSU government would seek cooperation with the Soviet Union as long as *Westpolitik* was not being undermined by *Ostpolitik* and ideological differences between East and West were not put aside. The Eastern treaties, Strauß stressed, would be honored “with no ifs and buts” and with no “*reservatium mentalis*”, to which SPD members responded “hear, hear!”. Strauß went even further in subsequent months, calling for a more active *Ostpolitik* and claiming that a Union-led government would work towards a “historic springtime” in German-Russian relations, as long as Moscow respected the German desire to end its division.⁵⁹⁴ It was the clearest example of an evolution – with Strauß as the unlikely poster boy - that Clay Clemens has described suitably:

*“Given Union orthodoxy—and especially public fundamentalist adherence to it—the party could not bring itself to renounce past positions or embrace new ones openly. Yet during this same period the Union did nonetheless indicate increasing acceptance of SPD-FDP policy and a readiness in practice to temporize somewhat on Union orthodoxy. Evidence of this adaptation did not appear in bold programmatic declarations, but it nonetheless surfaced within and beneath the rhetoric in debates over government policy when party spokesmen tried to describe how traditional Union positions could be made compatible with the now-established Eastern dialogue.”*⁵⁹⁵

One step forward, two steps back

Just as the Union rapprochement seemed to be a given, the 1980 election made it crystal-clear that the Union had not yet learned its final lesson. What had not changed, however, was that Franz-Josef Strauß played a leading role.

In the run up to the 1980 election, it had become clear that Helmut Kohl would have a tough time winning the nomination as the Union’s chancellor candidate again. Powerful forces in the Union continued to undermine the CDU-chairman. Kurt Biedenkopf had resigned as general secretary and was replaced by Heiner Geißler. For Strauß, this was yet another sign of the Unions dangerous drift leftwards - „*ideologisch-progressiven Öffnung nach links*“ – while powerful forces both within

⁵⁹⁴ Clemens, 182-184.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid, 176-177.

the CDU and CSU continued to doubt that Kohl was up to the job of winning the chancellery back for the Christian Democrats.⁵⁹⁶ Biedenkopf openly challenged Kohl in late 1978 and early 1979 by proposing that the CDU chairmanship and the head of the parliamentary faction in the Bundestag should not be the same person. Biedenkopf ultimately lost the power struggle, but Kohl was clearly weakened.⁵⁹⁷ At the party congress in Kiel in March 1979, Kohl was reelected as chairman with only 83 percent of the vote compared to 95 percent at the prior party congress in 1977.

At the same time, the CSU and fundamentalists within the CDU like Biedenkopf and Dregger articulated even more forcefully that it was now Strauß' turn to attempt to win back the chancellery. If not given the chance, the CSU would go it alone, it once again threatened, this time under the slogan "*Strauß oder Spaltung*".⁵⁹⁸ On May 23rd May 1979, rumors leaked that leading CDU-politicians had settled on Ernst Albrecht as chancellor candidate. Strauß was furious. Even though the Bavarian leader had privately doubted that he – or any other Christian Democrat for that matter – could beat Schmidt, he knew that the 1980 election would probably be his last shot at the chancellery since Strauß was 64 years old and 15 years older than Kohl.⁵⁹⁹ The following day, Strauß announced that he wanted to be the Union's chancellor candidate. At that point, Kohl had already abstained from running again and the CDU put forward Ernst Albrecht. The majority of the Union's parliamentary members in the Bundestag preferred Strauß, with the decisive support coming from members of the CDU. In December 1979 Strauß thus became the Christian Democrats candidate for chancellor following months of public infight and bad publicity for the Union.⁶⁰⁰

This was not the preferred outcome of the moderate wing, who still saw Strauß as being too controversial and confrontational, especially on foreign policy matters. The latter was somewhat ironic, considering that Kohl had argued that the Union "had never had so few disagreements than contemporary" pointing particularly to "foreign policy" as a sign of harmony.⁶⁰¹

In January 1980, only weeks after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and in the midst of an ongoing debate about the dual track decision, Kohl presented his preferred strategy for the election campaign at a leadership meeting in the CDU. In his view, "the resume of the détente policy

⁵⁹⁶ Quoted in Gassert in Lammert (eds.), 317.

⁵⁹⁷ Buchstab, *Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“*, XVIII.

⁵⁹⁸ Gassert in Lammert (eds.), 317.

⁵⁹⁹ Schinze-Gerber, 206.

⁶⁰⁰ Contrary to 1976, where the party leadership choose the chancellor candidate, the parliamentary faction decided in 1980. For more, see Schinze-Gerber, 152.

⁶⁰¹ Buchstab, *Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“*, XXII.

of the 1970s... is of course difficult to highlight now. Because this kind of détente policy has most certainly failed. Also, the policy of détente will certainly not be a signum of the next election campaign if the policy of détente cannot be better interpreted...in the face of Soviet aggression.”⁶⁰² Kohl also emphasized the importance of not showing Schadenfreude towards the government, instead portraying a trustworthy alternative that presented a “sober, responsible, serious answer”.⁶⁰³

According to this view, détente and *Ostpolitik* should have been a winning issue for the Union in the 1980 election, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Opinion polls indicated just the opposite, however, and showed remarkably that détente and foreign relations were one of very few issues where the Schmidt-Genscher government still had an advantage in the public’s view.⁶⁰⁴ General secretary Geisler cautioned that “foreign policy controversies during election campaigns were difficult to handle for an opposition” and tended to become a disadvantage, thus pleading his colleagues to tread carefully.⁶⁰⁵

Instead of neutralizing the issue, the CDU/CSU went on the offensive and made détente and *Ostpolitik* a centerpiece of its 1980 campaign, just as Strauß desired.⁶⁰⁶ In the introduction to its campaign program the Union proclaimed that “the socialistic detente policy of Schmidt, Brandt, Wehner and Bahr has to be substituted by a realistic peace policy. Soviet détente policy is a continuation of the Cold War with other means but the same goal: expansion of Soviet hegemony, dissolution of the Atlantic Alliance, isolation of the Federal Republic of Germany.” And it went even further: “Because of the socialist policy of detente, peace has become more uncertain than at any time since the end of the Second World War. The foreign policy of the Brandt/Schmidt governments...played its part in this. But German Ostpolitik cannot become Soviet Western policy.”⁶⁰⁷

The Strauß-led Union clearly sought confrontation and thus walked into the same trap, it had been caught in previously. The SPD welcomed the fight, since it had counted on making the election a presidential election like choice between Schmidt and Strauß, knowing that this would play

⁶⁰² Buchstab, Kohl: „*Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit*“, 2179-2180.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ „In der CDU hätten Sie nicht ständig Ärger“ in DER SPIEGEL 20/1980: <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/in-der-cdu-haetten-sie-nicht-staendig-aerger-a-b6f77b61-0002-0001-0000-000014315472> (accessed 5.3.23).

⁶⁰⁵ Buchstab, Kohl: „*Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit*“, 2312.

⁶⁰⁶ In the CDU board meeting on March 17th, 1980, Biedenkopf had emphasized that “the most important topics for Strauß are foreign policy”. See more: Ibid, 2301.

⁶⁰⁷ „1980: Wahlprogramm "Für Frieden und Freiheit in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in der Welt": https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1980_Fuer-Frieden-und-Freiheit.pdf/9c740094-a056-fc49-ff33-3921d34fa9f3 (accessed 5.3.23).

into the chancellor's advantage. At the same time, the SPD and its supporters attacked the Union candidate harshly throughout the campaign with slogans like "Stop Strauß", accused the Union of being "peace willing" but not "peace able", and castigated Strauß as a cold warrior and threat to world peace.⁶⁰⁸ Strauß' emotional and harsh responses at times were of little help in this regard and helped underlining the Social Democrats' line of attack.⁶⁰⁹ A study conducted for the Union after the election showed that the brutality of the campaign had benefited the SPD. At times, the Union had played its part by using harsh rhetoric itself, as Stoltenberg lamented in the leadership meeting on November 3rd, 1980.⁶¹⁰ The same study documented that FDP voters only had been closer aligned with the SPD than the CDU on two issues: *Ostpolitik* and whether they preferred Schmidt or Strauß as chancellor.⁶¹¹ It was thus not without irony that Manfred Wörner proclaimed that *Ostpolitik* had been settled internally at a leadership meeting a mere two months after the election: "Thank God we managed...to end all the disputes of the past, at least for the parliamentary group and probably also for large parts of the party."⁶¹²

The Christian Democrats' bad result in the October election – a decline of more than four percentage points compared to 1976 and the second worst result since 1949 – confirmed for the moderate wing that Strauß' failed candidacy was the antithesis to its attempt to modernize and make it more compatible with the societal changes that had characterized West Germany since the late 1960s. At the same time, it also confirmed that frontal opposition to the government on foreign policy in order to attempt to win an absolute majority was not a winning strategy.⁶¹³ The election loss also had the effect of putting the CSU on the defensive, at least for some time, since Strauß had now had his chance and lost.⁶¹⁴

⁶⁰⁸ See for example Verlag Roter Morgen: „Stoppt Strauß! Skandale, Korruption, Affären dunkle Karriere d. F.J.S. vom nationalsozialistischen Führungsoffizier zum Kanzlerkandidaten“ (Dortmund, 1979). Especially the denunciations from outside groups that supported the SPD where so harsh at times, for instance when Strauß was castigated as a Nazi, that the SPD had to distance itself publicly. For more see Martin Huber, *Die Bundestagswahlkämpfe der CDU/CSU als Oppositionsparteien 1972, 1976, 1980, 2002 (Beiträge zur Politikwissenschaft 10, München 2008)*.

⁶⁰⁹ At a rally in Essen in September 1979, Strauß lambasted demonstrators as „Dr. Joseph Goebbels best students“ and „the best Nazis that have ever lived“. Quoted in Schinze-Gerber, 210, footnote 42.

⁶¹⁰ Günter Buchstab, *Kohl: "Gelassenheit und Zuversicht": Die Protokolle des CDU-Bundesvorstands 1980 – 1983* (Droste, 2019), 66.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid*, 119.

⁶¹² *Ibid*, 186.

⁶¹³ See more: Schinze-Gerber, 159.

⁶¹⁴ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Gelassenheit und Zuversicht"*, x. The CSU, however, maintained that *Ostpolitik* had failed and that an *ostpolitikal* rapprochement thus made no sense at all. ACSP, LG 1980:12, Protokoll der Landesgruppensitzung Kreuth V am 30.10.1980, 15.30-18.15.

Crisis mode

At the same time, numerous crises exposed that the Cold War had not disappeared even though leading German politicians had talked about it in past time for a long time. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, Helmut Schmidt struggled to find the right balance between a hawkish Carter-administration on the cusp of an election year and who was already pressured domestically and internationally over the Iran Hostage Crisis, and a military buildup and aggressive Soviet behavior outside of Europe, that threatened to undermine European détente. Carter called for Western sanctions against the Soviets and a boycott of the Olympic games in Moscow. The West German reaction was less forceful, fearing that sanctions would backfire and have dire effect on détente in Europe. Bonn had an important ally in France, who also cautioned against overreactions and called for “calculability” in times of crisis. Schmidt also insisted that his planned meetings with leaders in the Eastern Bloc, among them Brezhnev and Honecker, should go ahead as planned. In the chancellor’s view, it was particularly important to communicate in crisis and Schmidt stressed in the Bundestag “that applies to a special degree” to Germany. Nobody could probably have agreed more with that notion than the man, whose political philosophy has been summed up as “peace through communication.”⁶¹⁵ Hans-Dietrich Genscher was however becoming increasingly alarmed about the risk of a transatlantic crisis. In the end, the German government recommended a boycott of the Olympic Games, which powerful social democratic figures like Bahr openly undermined, and found a solution with the U.S., where it did not undermine U.S. sanctions while tightening restrictions on specific strategic goods.⁶¹⁶

While Schmidt’s approach was popular domestically, according to polls at the time, the Christian Democrats felt validated in their beliefs about an aggressive and expansionist Soviet Union. Especially the fundamentalists took a victory lap and claimed that détente was to fault. In their long held view détente had emboldened and strengthened the Kremlin for over a decade and now the chickens finally came home to roost. At the core of the debate between was especially, whether détente was – or should – be worldwide in scope and indivisible in practice. In other words, what happened outside Europe could not stay outside of Europe. Kohl warned that the consequences of

⁶¹⁵ Agnes Bresselau von Bressensdorf, *Frieden durch Kommunikation. Das System Genscher und die Entspannungspolitik im Zweiten Kalten Krieg 1979–1982/83* (Berlin-Boston, 2015).

⁶¹⁶ Clemens, 193-195.

such a reasoning – where European détente was divisible from events outside the continent - would be “mistaken, dangerous, even fatal”.⁶¹⁷

At the same time, the Union criticized Schmidt’s attempt to be a “double interpreter” between Washington and Moscow.⁶¹⁸ In their view, Schmidt should not attempt to interpret but choose sides in the conflict and staunchly support the United States. Not doing so would endanger the Federal Republic’s security, they argued, and highlighted simultaneously Schmidt’s strained relationship with Carter and refusal to distance himself from the SPD’s leftwing, which the Union had labelled the “Moscow Faction”.⁶¹⁹ The particular phrase nonetheless, the Union was markedly less polemical this time around, especially compared to its early years in opposition. Moderates like Mertes wrote an open letter to Schmidt – which of course was as much a political attempt to neutralize détente and *Ostpolitik* in an upcoming election – and called for bipartisan solutions and warned his colleagues of “rhetorical shows of strength”, while Strauß cautioned, “I want no quarrels...the situation is far too serious for that.”⁶²⁰

While critical of Schmidt’s handling of the situation, there was bipartisan consensus in Bonn that détente was vital, particularly in Europe. The main difference continued to be the question whether détente should be indivisible or not. Moderates like Kohl and Albrecht argued that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had demonstrated the need for détente in Europe but continued to caution that European could and should not be separated from Soviet actions in the Third World. Strauß, not known for rhetorical understatements, went as far as proclaiming, that “only a fool with criminal instincts could want to conduct something other than a policy of detente.”⁶²¹

As Mertes reiterated, the question was not what the Christian Democrats would do in such a situation if they were in government but what they could do as (constructive) opposition. The semantic approach was to call for a policy of “realistic détente” that addressed the Soviets military buildup and aggression in the Third World and staunchly supported the U.S. by boycotting the Moscow Olympics and sanctioning the Soviets. The devil was in the detail, however. In reality, it is difficult to analyze what exactly the Union would have done differently, especially in a hypothetical coalition government with the FDP. Mertes cancelled high level visits with representatives in the East

⁶¹⁷ Quoted in Clemens, 196.

⁶¹⁸ The term is from Kristina Spohr, *The Global Chancellor*, chapter 5. For the CDU, this amounted to sit “between two chairs”. ACSP, LG 1980:2, Protokoll der 177. Sitzung der CSU-Landesgruppe am 12. Februar 1980.

⁶¹⁹ Clemens, 196.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid*, 197. This did not prevent Strauß from polemical attempts against the SPD left though.

⁶²¹ *Ibid*, 198.

as a sign of punishment for Soviet actions. Strauß spoke about the desire for new accords with the Eastern Bloc, described the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as being in line with the Kremlin's interest and repeated his wish to visit Moscow, while his colleagues almost simultaneously called for Schmidt to cancel his planned meeting with Brezhnev. Strauß then visited Bucharest for talks with Ceaușescu in early 1980, while Mertes called Schmidt's summit in Moscow in June a bad idea, again arguing that low-level meetings were more appropriate than spectacular high-level summits. The irony was obvious. When confronted with presenting concrete proposals, Kohl and Strauß replied that they would do so once put in a position of power and that it was not the oppositions job to advance, concrete "unpopular measures". Strauß effectively ruled out sanctions during a visit in Washington of all places. In effect, Strauß agreed with Schmidt's basic argument that Washington could not necessarily always be trusted after Carter's flipflop on the neutron bomb and that sanctions would not change the mind of the Soviet superpower but could escalate the crisis in Europe.⁶²²

In short, the Union continued to attempt to have it both ways, calling both for stauncher Atlanticism, while at the same time stressing the importance of credibility and trustworthiness towards the Warsaw Pact and particularly the Soviet Union.⁶²³

The unrest in Poland further laid bare the Union's difficult balancing act. Schmidt cancelled his meeting with Honecker but refused to connect the two events, which prompted criticism from the CDU/CSU, who also criticized Schmidt's hesitant support for the Solidarity trade union. Kohl put the criticism convincingly, when he pointed out the obvious "dilemma of détente": the West German chancellor could/would not visit East Germany due to strikes in Poland, which at the same time Schmidt could/would not support emphatically.⁶²⁴ What Kohl articulated here, was a powerful critique of *Ostpolitik* and détente, that also has been voiced by Timothy Garton Ash in his classic account "In Europe's name": in order to maintain good relations with political leaders in the Eastern Bloc, and particularly Moscow, strikes and other attempts to rebel from below by ordinary people and dissidents were seen as a diplomatic nuisance and counterproductive because they threatened to undermine détente in Europe. The irony was obvious: while the Western Europeans had made the issue of human rights a cornerstone in the Final Act, major actors like West Germany were now afraid

⁶²² Quoted in Clemens, 200.

⁶²³ Ibid, 196-200.

⁶²⁴ Ibid, 203.

to insist on the very importance of human rights because this could derail relations between East and West in an already tense international climate.⁶²⁵

When push came to shove, the Union often opted to tone down its criticism of the Schmidt-Genscher government. The CDU/CSU proposed suspending existing credits to Poland, but generally abstained from coming with concrete (counter)proposals to the government. Strauß warned that the lessons of the Soviet crushing of uprisings in 1956 and 1968 were that dissidents in the Eastern Bloc should not be encouraged or count on help from the West. While opinion polls indicated support for the Union's approach, they also indicated that the Union could yet again not beat the government in its natural habitat. Calls for a realistic *détente* notwithstanding, a clear majority of West Germans still put their trust in Schmidt and the SPD to improve ties with the East. Astonishingly, even one out of three CDU/CSU respondents agreed.

When Honecker played hardball after the 1980 election with his "Gera Demands", leading Christian Democrats warned against suspending already agreed payments even though they for years had criticized Schmidt and Genscher for not using the Federal Republic's economic leverage vis a vis the GDR.⁶²⁶ When Schmidt visited Honecker in December 1981, a visit that was overshadowed by the declaration of martial law in Poland, leading Christian Democrats dared not criticize the chancellor's timid response because they – like Schmidt – feared for the consequences in intra-German relations.⁶²⁷ The same was the case with regards to the European-Soviet natural-gas pipeline. Despite strong American opposition and sanctions against the Soviet Union and Poland in the aftermath of the declaration of martial law, the Union did not reject the project outright, even though Mertes had put forward a resolution in the Bundestag that called for suspension.⁶²⁸ While emphasizing the risk of becoming energy independent on the Soviet Union, the Christian Democrats remained wary of sanctions and stressed that it would honor existing agreements, well aware that the latter put it directly at odds with the Reagan administration. By the summer of 1982, when the Reagan administration embargoed construction materials for the pipeline and intervened judicially against American firms with European affiliates involved in the project, leading Christian Democrats sided

⁶²⁵ Nuti, 3.

⁶²⁶ Clemens, 200-206.

⁶²⁷ At the same time, it has to be emphasized that the timid West German reaction by no means was a unique reaction. Generally, U.S.-Western European differences in assessments of the merits of *détente* had become more pronounced during the late 1970s and early 1980s. See for example *The Crisis of Détente in Europe*, particularly Douglas Selva's chapter *The Politics of the lesser evil: the West, the Polish Crisis, and the CSCE review conference in Madrid, 1981–1983*.

⁶²⁸ For a good overview on the transatlantic disagreements see Chiampan.

with Genscher and, to a lesser extent, Schmidt. Transatlantic disagreements were blurred behind calls for more “effective consultations” and “clear decisions” in the alliance, while Kohl subtly described the disagreements as “many mutual misunderstandings”. In fact, the rift between the CDU/CSU and the Reagan administration was pronounced, attempts to disguise notwithstanding.⁶²⁹

Prior principles yet again had to yield for political and electoral concerns.

Government in waiting? A tale of two transformations

Looking back on the Union’s rapprochement in his memoirs, Richard von Weizsäcker choose the following description: “When the Union itself came into power, ten years after the fundamental dispute over the treaties in 1972, its former resistance to Brandt's Ostpolitik no longer played a role...Fortunately, the foreign policy situation of the Germans is not suitable for a long-term internal political dispute.”⁶³⁰

It was a noble interpretation, free of electoral considerations or populism, instead having the Germans best interest at heart. That is certainly one way of evaluating the Christian Democrats’ ostpolitikal evolution throughout the long 1970s.

Here is another: In the aftermath of the federal election in October 1980, where the Union yet again had failed to regain the chancellery, a cartoon published in *Der Spiegel* put the Christian Democrats’ electoral dilemma in a nutshell. The cartoon depicted two Union politicians, their heads swollen and covered with bandages from an unsuccessful attempt to ram through a brick wall. In frustration, one remarks: “The third try, and still no luck; maybe there is another entrance after all.” Next to them is a large door, boldly marked “Ostpolitik”, which they both are disregarding.⁶³¹

In many ways, von Weizsäcker’s hindsight and the contemporary cartoon capture the two essential questions, on which this chapter has centered: first, why did the Christian Democrats not instigate their *Ostpolitik* rapprochement sooner, considering how obviously it was an electoral

⁶²⁹ Clemens, 211-225.

⁶³⁰ Quoted in Quoted in Szatkowski, 78.

⁶³¹ *Der Spiegel* Nr. 45/1980, originally published in *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*. Clay Clemens also refers to the cartoon in his introduction.

and coalitional liability for the Union? Second, was Helmut Kohl right, when he again and again emphasized: “Foreign policy is our destiny”?⁶³²

The historian Philipp Gassert has made an interesting comparison in this regard. In his analysis, under both Kiesinger and Barzel’s leadership, the Union „walked into the trap”, the SPD had done during Adenauer’s long reign: challenging the current government on foreign policy. While the SPD did so in the 1950s with regards to *Westbindung*, rearmament and NATO, the Union did so on *Ostpolitik* and détente. As Gassert put it: „The CDU/CSU allowed themselves to be forced into a foreign policy controversy, in which it could hardly win due to the international climate and where it also was divided internally. It challenged the government in a field where it has a natural advantage.”⁶³³

The major difference between the SPD’s rapprochement on *Westbindung* during the 1950s and the CDU/CSU’s crossing of the ostpolitikal Rubicon during the long 1970s is, that there is no Union equivalent of the SPD’s 1959 Godesberg Program.⁶³⁴ As this chapter has demonstrated, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment where the Union accepted the domestic and international realities of the détente era and fundamentally changed its own idea of *Ostpolitik* and détente. Indeed, Helmut Kohl had forcefully and categorially rejected any such thinking in the aftermath of the lost 1980 election, stating in the leadership meeting on November 3rd, 1980:

*“The stupidest thing I've heard, and I want to address that very clearly here, because it belongs on the table here and has to be dealt with here, is that we should rethink. In some newspapers I read now that I will give a speech when the government declaration is introduced, that has Wehner’s Godesberg's speech as an example, in order to justify a rethinking of our politics.”*⁶³⁵

⁶³² Buchstab, *Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“*, XLI, see also 2368.

⁶³³ Gassert in Lammert (eds.), 280.

⁶³⁴ In 1987, *Der Spiegel* pointed towards the party congress in Hamburg in 1981 where the party “gave up its role as the perennial naysayer in Ostpolitik and prepared the coalition with the Free Democrats”. See more *Hans-Dietrich Genscher - Diplomat der Einheit: Ein SPIEGEL E-Book* (SPIEGEL-Verlag. Kindle Edition), location 2352 of 3737. Clay Clemens points towards Kohl’s speech in the Bundestag on November 26, 1980, as being “as close as the Union would officially come to a “Wehner speech”, even if it fell short of the latter’s formal embrace of government policy.” Clemens, 208-209.

⁶³⁵ Buchstab, *Kohl: "Gelassenheit und Zuversicht"*, 55-56.

Later on, however, Kohl actually described at length the CDU's ostpolitikal journey, arguing:

*"We will have to talk bluntly. If you want to talk differently, you have to say it here. When it comes to Deutschland- and Ostpolitik, we start from the treaties that are valid, against us and against our will, but which have been conducted legally...So far; I haven't found anyone, in any committee, who questions them. So, anyone who has a question here and who understands it to mean liberal politics must say so. Our goal must be to have reasonable and the best possible relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe."*⁶³⁶

Kohl then continued to propose his favorite mantra – it is time to look forward and stop looking back – which is worth quoting at length:

*"I also think we should say we want to look ahead. It would be even better if we didn't say it at all, but simply looked ahead. I don't see anything appealing in continuing to fight yesterday's battles. But that applies to both sides within the Union, I have to make that clear. And when a bit of grass has grown over the years 1970-72, instead of letting the turf grow a little thicker, a camel will inevitably come along with wide hooves and kick the grass apart again. It does us no good to keep thinking about how it was back then. The constant accusatory tone among ourselves, whether it was right or wrong, is of no use to us either. There's a lot that can be said, but I strongly advise, dear friends, that we start from the facts."*⁶³⁷

Long story short, again in Kohl's own words: "Of course, if we're foaming at the mouth when we talk about Ostpolitik, we obviously don't reach the voters at all; that is surely true. Just like we don't reach the voters if we play down the open differences."⁶³⁸

The election of 1980 was in many ways crucial. It highlighted that both parties had driven respectively leftwards and rightwards, which accentuated the old debate about the proper relationship between *Westpolitik* and *Ostpolitik*. The disappointing election result furthermore helped bringing the trend to a halt for the Union, while it accelerated the SPD's radicalization with the election of more left leaning members to the Bundestag. At the same time, the 1980 election with its focus on foreign affairs highlighted that inherent disadvantage for the Christian Democratic

⁶³⁶ Buchstab, Kohl: "Gelassenheit und Zuversicht", 55-56.

⁶³⁷ Ibid, 60.

⁶³⁸ Ibid, 61.

opposition, who generally was considered being more successfully on domestic and economic issues. While challenging the government on foreign policy could at times be a successful political undertaking - as the Union's staunch support for the dual track decision demonstrated – this was not decisive for the outcome of the 1980 election.⁶³⁹ It was, however, a prime example of both the Union's pro-Americanism, especially in times of strained relations between Bonn and Washington and American flip flops on the neutron bomb, which clearly distinguished it from the Schmidt-Genscher government and made it more acceptable as a future coalition partner for the FDP. Indeed, by the early 1980s, the Union and its call for a more “genuine détente” or “*realistische Entspannungspolitik*” on the foundation of an unequivocal *Westbindung* was more in line with the West German mood and closer to the societal changes that had predated these shifts, even though the dual track decision was controversial also among Christian Democratic voters. The rapprochement went in other words both ways: both the CDU/CSU – primarily the former though – moved towards the center of the ostpolitikal discussion, while the West German public became both more accustomed with the limits of *Ostpolitik* and more fearful about what increasing superpower tensions and the decline of European détente could mean for a frontline state like Germany.

We will obviously never know what might have happened, had the CDU/CSU won the majority of seats in the 1976 election. Maybe an ostpolitikal turnaround might have been a slim possibility at that point, considering the influence of the conservative wing of the party and especially the CSU. Similar hypothetical considerations could of course be made about the outcome of a 1980 election, where Franz Josef Strauß would have become chancellor.⁶⁴⁰

There are, however, important arguments to be made against such a hypothetical scenario. Internationally, it would have been difficult to imagine that a CDU/CSU-led government would go against its allies by backtracking on its version of détente. Similarly backtracking would have potentially meant losing improvements in East-West relations which not least had benefitted the very same East Germans the Christian Democrats wanted to comfort until reunification was within sight. Speaking of reunification, an ostpolitikal turnaround against the wishes of both allies and antagonists would – to put it diplomatically – probably not have improved the odds of reuniting East

⁶³⁹ In the subsequent years, the Christian Democrats at times delivered the decisive votes to support the dual track decision in the Bundestag, for example in June 1981. See more in Clemens, 216.

⁶⁴⁰ Fritz Zimmermann argued after the lost election of 1980 regarding the debate whether the Union had to rethink its approach *Ostpolitik*: “On Ostpolitik there are now also voices in the Union to be heard that sound like retreat. There is no reason at all for that. Not we have failed, but SPD and FDP.” ACSP, LG 1980:12, Protokoll der Sitzung am 30.10.1980, vormittags, der Klausurtagung V der CSU-Landesgruppe in Wildbad Kreuth.

and West Germany. Domestically, most of the population would have been advocating against turning back the ostpolitikal clock and the same would have been the case for the many German companies, who profited from the relaxation of tensions between East and West and served as important bridge builders in the Cold War.

The point with this theoretical exercise is thus to highlight a bigger point that Richard von Weizsäcker had already made in 1974. All these above-mentioned arguments and fundamental conditions notwithstanding, a considerable – and powerful – faction within the CDU/CSU had a great difficulty to “accept the irreversibility of these developments.”⁶⁴¹

“Drawing a line under the ten-year long argument over Ostpolitik”?

One key question remains then: was the Union finally ready to “draw a line under the ten-year long argument over Ostpolitik”, as the influential CSU-politician Fritz Zimmermann had proposed in November 1980, when it returned to power in October 1982?⁶⁴²

Not quite. When Helmut Kohl said at a CDU/CSU-leadership meeting in October 1981, “I don't see anyone really wanting a new Ostpolitik”, nothing could have been further from the truth.⁶⁴³ “Even as the Union prepared to re-enter government in 1982...it still harbored numerous reservations about SPD-FDP Ostpolitik.”⁶⁴⁴ Indeed, as Manfred Wörner put it a month before Kohl became chancellor: “The Union's foreign policy since 1972 was a tedious way, to rewrite it positively.”⁶⁴⁵ Genscher put it more polemical but not less on point weeks before the change of guards in Bonn: there were still “shrill tones” in the CDU/CSU.⁶⁴⁶

⁶⁴¹ Clemens, 127.

⁶⁴² Quoted in Clemens, 207). At the time, in late October and early November 1980, there had been a debate in the West German press as well, whether the Union finally had reached its point of no return/crossed the ostpolitikal Rubicon/was ready for its Godesberg Moment, etc. Powerful CSU-politicians like Fritz Zimmermann were vehemently opposed to this idea and argued forcefully internally that it was important “that the impression did not manifest itself that we are aiming for an ostpolitikal Bad Godesberg”. ACSP, LG 1980:12, Protokoll der Sitzung am 30.10.1980, vormittags, der Klausurtagung V der CSU-Landesgruppe in Wildbad Kreuth.

⁶⁴³ Quoted in Georg Schneider, *Alois Mertens (1921–1985). Das außenpolitische Denken und Handeln eines Christlichen Demokraten* (Droste, 2012), 418.

⁶⁴⁴ Clemens, 2. This is probably also a key reason that historians cannot point towards a crystal clear “Godesberg moment” for the Union, since such an undertaking probably would have torpedoed the ever so fragile unity of the CDU/CSU.

⁶⁴⁵ See also Buchstab, *Kohl: "Gelassenheit und Zuversicht"*, 859.

⁶⁴⁶ Quoted in Clemens, 229.

As Timothy Garton Ash has noted, the Christian Democrats' acceptance of *Ostpolitik* was "a long, complex, not to say confused process" that also is more difficult to date precisely than the SPD's acceptance of Adenauer's *Westbindung* as a corner stone for West German foreign policy.⁶⁴⁷ Ultimately, the Union's rapprochement was driven primarily by four major developments: personal change at the top of the CDU with a new generation of leaders like Rainer Barzel, Alois Mertes and Helmut Kohl, electoral considerations in the face of subsequent failures to regain the chancellery and domestic and international developments. The last two, which have been highlighted in the previous chapter about the "*Trendwende*" and decline of détente during Schmidt and Genscher's reign, are worth repeating briefly here, because they ultimately were decisive for the change of the guard in October 1982.

The cornerstone of West German foreign policy during the Cold War had since the Adenauer era been *Westbindung*. Strong relations with the West, especially the United States, were the foundation for Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* and were well aligned with American détente at the time. Over time, however, American and West German – but also more broadly European – conceptions and the political prioritization of détente changed. By the late 1970s, superpower détente was viewed as a sign of weakness in the U.S. that had emboldened the Soviet Union. In Europe, and especially in West Germany, the dominant view however was that European détente had improved the lives of Europeans and helped "perforating the Iron Curtain."⁶⁴⁸ The political effects of these diverging points of view were profound, especially for a frontline state and divided nation like Germany. For German foreign and security policy, *Westbindung* and *Ostpolitik* were two sides of the same coin, meaning that any notable change in one area had great effect on the other as well. Finding the balance between *Westpolitik* – which in effect also was Germany's security policy qua the U.S. role as *Schutzmacht* – and *Ostpolitik* became increasingly difficult, especially in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Polish Crisis and the ongoing controversy over the dual track decision. Additionally, the personal clashes between Schmidt and Carter, and to a lesser extent Schmidt and Reagan, took a toll on the transatlantic relationship.⁶⁴⁹ Carter even went so far to write in his diary, that not having to deal with Schmidt anymore was the only positive aspect of losing to Ronald Reagan in the 1980

⁶⁴⁷ Ash, *Europe's Name*, 32.

⁶⁴⁸ Odd Arne Westad and Poul Villaume (eds), *Perforating the Iron Curtain - European Détente, Transatlantic Relations, and the Cold War, 1965-1985* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010).

⁶⁴⁹ See for instance *The Strained Alliance* and *The Global Chancellor*.

presidential election.⁶⁵⁰ At the same time, relations with France flourished – not least due to the close personal relationship between Schmidt and Giscard d’Estaing – and European integration progressed continuously.⁶⁵¹ The German chancellor and French president had similar assessments on the need for a stronger Western Europe, not exclusively but also due to shared doubts about U.S. leadership, while insisting on the need to keep détente in Europe ‘alive’. At the same time, however, France had, in the words of Wolfgang Schollwer - an influential FDP-member of the foreign office’s section for policy planning – reconsidered its role as the “pioneer of détente in Europe”, while the Federal Republic risked becoming an outlier; a very telling description that puts the Federal Republic’s ostpolitikal influence and position into perspective.⁶⁵²

These external developments combined with the SPD’s leftwards drift and the uncertainty about the dual track decision which was a symbolism for military deterrence and balance in Europe – as Brandt had put it in 1968 “military deterrence has secured the peace in Europe. It would be frivolous to compromise it and jeopardize what has been achieved” - opened the door for the Union to return to the chancellery.⁶⁵³ Exactly because *Westpolitik* and *Ostpolitik* were two sides of the same coin.

The day after the 1976 election Richard von Weizsäcker remarked: “In the Ostpolitik, where a very strong bond was made (between the SPD and the FDP), there has been widespread disillusionment. I don't see that Ostpolitik, for its part, will constantly provide the cement for the coalition.”⁶⁵⁴ Indeed, diverging conceptions of *Ostpolitik* and how to balance it with *Westpolitik* had become a milestone around the coalitions neck by the fall of 1982. Partly because the CDU/CSU had crossed the ostpolitikal Rubicon – even though reservations remained – but primarily because the SPD was at risk of turning its back on the most important credo for West German foreign policy during the Cold War, also skillfully articulated by Willy Brandt in 1968: “Without firm backing in the

⁶⁵⁰ Klaus Wiegrefe, Carter Diary Reveals Rocky Relationship with German Chancellor Schmidt” (*Der Spiegel*, 12.10.2010): <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/no-love-lost-carter-diary-reveals-rocky-relationship-with-german-chancellor-schmidt-a-721449.html> (accessed 5.3.23).

⁶⁵¹ For the importance of European integration in the late stages of the Cold War in Europe see Frédéric Bozo, Marie-Pierre Rey, N. Piers Ludlow and Leopoldo Nuti (eds.), *Europe and the End of the Cold War: A Reappraisal* (Routledge, 2009).

⁶⁵² Wolfgang Schollwer: „Zustand und Zukunft der Ost-West-Beziehungen und die Möglichkeit zur Weiterführung der Entspannungspolitik“ in Archiv des Liberalismus, BFA Aussenpolitik, A44-35, 19 and 30.

⁶⁵³ Quoted in Robert Hofmann „Waren wir "die Guten"? Die Militär- und Entspannungspolitik der SPD in der Regierungsverantwortung 1966-1977/78 (Studien zur deutschen Sozialdemokratie, Kindle Edition), 27.

It is also important to highlight that the FDP itself had a significant minority advocating against the dual track decision. At the FDP party congress in May 1981, a third of the delegates came out against the decision. See more in Bressendorf, 292.

⁶⁵⁴ Buchstab, Kohl: „Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit“, 28.

(Western) alliance, a policy of détente cannot be conducted”.⁶⁵⁵ Ten years later, in 1978, the CDU formulated this credo similarly but more categorically in its basic program from Ludwigshafen: “We reject any unilateral weakening of the Atlantic defense alliance under the pretext of detente.”⁶⁵⁶

When the Christian Democrats returned to power after 13 long years of opposition in the fall of 1982, there was little doubt that the once so vocal opposition would not rock the ostpolitikal boat. In August 1982, Kohl repeated his principle: “We stand by the contracts that have been concluded.”⁶⁵⁷ A few months earlier, Helmut Schmidt had sarcastically described the moderate CDU-members rapprochement with the words “if it takes a little longer, the CDU and the CSU, Herr Kohl and Herr Mertes, will claim that they invented Ostpolitik.”⁶⁵⁸

Not quite. Rather, as Clay Clemens has put it: “As the SPD left grew disenchanted with Schmidt-Genscher pragmatism, the Union became tacitly reconciled to it.”⁶⁵⁹ In the end, it was in fact Hans-Dietrich Genscher and the FDP, who had opened the door for the Union and invited them back into the chancellery, while the SPD had imploded.

Looking back at the CDU/CSU’s rapprochement, it would be too much to conclude that “the CDU gradually learned to live with, and even love, what it had once so denounced”, as William E. Griffith put it back in the late 1980s in his foreword to the most thorough assessment of the Union’s ostpolitikal evolution.⁶⁶⁰ A more accurate description would still be “ambivalent adaption”, as Clay Clemens has put it.⁶⁶¹ Or, to coin a phrase, that the Christian Democrats learned to continue détente unenthusiastically.

The CDU/CSU had indeed learned to live with *Ostpolitik*, and also advocated for a West German policy of détente. It’s specifics, however, differed in some respects considerably from

⁶⁵⁵ Quoted in Hofmann, „Waren wir *„die Guten“*?, 27. It is important to note, however, that opinion polls seemed to indicate support for the SPD’s sceptic view of the Reagan administration and opposition to the dual track decision position at the time.

⁶⁵⁶ „Grundsatzprogramm der Christlich Demokratischen Union Deutschlands verabschiedet auf dem 26. Bundesparteitag Ludwigshafen, 23.-25. Oktober 1978“: https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1978_Grundsatzprogramm_Ludwigshafen.pdf/6ab8ab48-871d-52a2-a603-989c928e127f (accessed 5.3.23). The quote is on page 59.

⁶⁵⁷ Frank Bösch, *Macht und Machtverlust. Die Geschichte der CDU* (Stuttgart, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2002), 43.

⁶⁵⁸ The quote is from an interview in *Der Spiegel* 27/82 in *SPIEGEL-Gespräche mit Helmut Schmidt: Ein SPIEGEL E-Book* (German Edition). SPIEGEL-Verlag. Kindle Edition. “

⁶⁵⁹ Clemens, 193.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid*, ix.

⁶⁶¹ Clemens, 3 and 235.

the Social-Liberal *Neue Ostpolitik*, which it never came to love.⁶⁶² While there still were internal frictions and disagreements within the Union, the once so vocal opposition had become relatively tamed by 1982, not least by its desire to return to power after continued electoral failures. At the same time, it benefitted from its parliamentary role, as Timothy Garton Ash has observed regarding the differences between parties in power and parties in parliamentary opposition: “The policy of a party in opposition can never be pinned down as firmly as that of a party in government, because it does not to be definite, and, indeed, may benefit precisely from being indefinite.”⁶⁶³ At a critical point in time and the Cold War, a CDU/CSU-FDP government thus signaled continuity through change in West German foreign affairs, both with regard to *Westpolitik* and *Ostpolitik*.

Six years earlier, Helmut Kohl had been castigated by Franz Josef Strauß in harsh terms: “He will never become chancellor. He's totally incompetent. He lacks the character, the intellectual and the political prerequisites. He lacks everything for it.”⁶⁶⁴ Kohl had been declared politically dead a few times as well, both after his loss in the 1976 election and especially in the runup to the 1980 election where he abstained from running again. In 1981, the British magazine *Economist* had asked, “which Helmut will they dump first?” and as late as the summer of 1982, powerful Christian Democrats wanted Kohl removed from the chairmanship because they had lost faith in him.⁶⁶⁵

Less than six months later, Helmut Kohl became chancellor and ended up shaping the end of the Cold War, German reunification, and the creation of the European Union, while also becoming the longest sitting democratically elected chancellor in German history. History is indeed full of ironies.

⁶⁶² Therefore, it is also not entirely correct to say, as Gottfried Niedhart does, that “the Kohl/Genscher government continued the *Ostpolitik* uninterrupted.” Kohl and Genscher obviously conducted *Ostpolitik* as well, but the concept had changed, otherwise a change of guard would not have been necessarily in the first place. Quote in Niedhart, *Durch den Eisernen Vorhang*, Kindle Location 3847.

⁶⁶³ Ash, *Europe's Name*, 312.

⁶⁶⁴ Buchstab, Kohl: „*Stetigkeit, Klugheit, Geduld und Zähigkeit*“, XIV. See also Buchstab, Kohl: “*Gelassenheit und Zuversicht*”, x.

⁶⁶⁵ Quoted in Clemens, 200.

THE TRIUMPH OF CONTINUITY

4. "Characterized by continuity"? The Kohl-Genscher government's first *ostpolitikal* accents from election to reelection, September 1982-March 1983

The aim of this chapter is to trace the evolution of *Ostpolitik* under the new CDU/CSU-government from the collapse of the Social-Liberal government in September 1982 to Kohl and Genscher's decisive electoral victory in March 1983.

The chapter puts forward four key arguments. First, the element of *ostpolitikal* continuity was emphasized strongly by Kohl and Genscher. Second, while emphasizing continuity, the new government was at the same time aware of the double challenges to the FRG's *Ostpolitik*. These challenges originated both from the international deterioration of détente, which has been described in chapter two, as of domestic and economic concerns. Due to the increased interlinks of domestic and foreign affairs amidst the backdrop of an increasingly interdependent and globalized world, the chapter also underlines, that separating domestic and foreign affairs too rigorously from each other risks missing the crucial interdependence between the domestic and international arena that the new government was well aware of. Third, while continuity was indeed emphasized, it often went together with a proclamation of renewal, especially in terms of transatlantic unity and reliability. This mixed messaging of continuity and renewal – characterized as 'renewed continuity' in this chapter - created paradoxical arguments at times. Fourth, while the collapse of the Social-Liberal coalition and the beginning of – what would turn out to be – a long era of CDU/CSU-FDP governance amounted to a domestic caesura in West German history, the international impact of the change of guards in Bonn in the fall of 1982 was also significant. Rather than symbolizing a "turn" (*Wende*) as the Christian Democrats had stressed, the CDU/CSU-FDP alignment actually *prevented* the turn in West German foreign policy, which was underway due to the leftwards drift of the SPD as we saw in the previous chapters.

The irony of these developments should not be lost on the observer. During the 1980 election campaign, Helmut Kohl had already argued along the same lines. Back then, the argument of 'renewed continuity' was not convincing to Genscher - especially not with Franz Josef Strauß running as the Union's chancellor candidate. After the Social-Liberal government's comfortable reelection that year, Helmut Schmidt argued in his governmental declaration in November 1980 that

the Schmidt-Genscher government's foreign policy was "clear" and "predictable" (*klar und berechenbar*).⁶⁶⁶ Two years later, the situation had changed so dramatically, also in foreign affairs, that Genscher was convinced of the necessity to change horses in midstream.⁶⁶⁷ From then on, the new government tried to pursue a policy of 'renewed continuity' after a revolting SPD base had contributed decisively to Schmidt's fall.

Which Helmut?

Detailed accounts have predominantly described Helmut Kohl as a cautious man, who favored compromise, consensus, continuity and put a great emphasis on the politics of the personal.⁶⁶⁸ In the historian Andreas Wirsching's description, Kohl had "the adequate mixture of a few, but unshakable, convictions and otherwise a pragmatic approach."⁶⁶⁹ Moderation would not suffice to describe Helmut Kohl's ostpolitikal approach after becoming chancellor. When listening to the new Helmut (Kohl) in the Chancellery, one could wonder whether the old Helmut (Schmidt) actually had stepped down or not.

During his first trip to the United States in November 1982, Kohl was asked by a German journalist to describe the continuities and differences in his foreign policy vis a vis the Schmidt government's. The new chancellor answered that "my government does indeed pursue a number of same policies than my predecessors. The problem of the Schmidt government was that it had no majority for its foreign policy anymore. Hence, there is a different form of continuity here", Kohl stressed.⁶⁷⁰ Especially the latter point is important to keep in mind. Helmut Kohl had, as the historian Heinrich August Winkler has noted, "a political foundation and position (*Machtgrundlage*)

⁶⁶⁶ Deutscher Bundestag, stenographischer Bericht, 5. Sitzung, Bonn, Montag den 24. November, 1980: <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btp/09/09005.pdf> (accessed 18.5.2018).

⁶⁶⁷ In this context it is very interesting to read Helmut Kohl's response to Schmidt's governmental declaration: Plenarprotokoll 9/6 Deutscher Bundestag Stenographischer Bericht 6. Sitzung Bonn, Mittwoch, den 26. November 1980: <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/09/09006.pdf> (accessed 24/6/2023).

⁶⁶⁸ See Stephen Padgett (eds.), *Adenauer to Kohl: The Development of the German Chancellorship* (Georgetown University Press, 1994) and Hans-Peter, Schwarz, *Helmut Kohl - Eine Politische Biographie* (Pantheon, 2014).

⁶⁶⁹ Wirsching, *Provisorium*, 25.

⁶⁷⁰ BArch, B136-16835, "Pressekonferenz am Montag 15. November 1982, 22.30 Uhr, im Hotel Watergate in Washington", 15.11.1982.

that Schmidt never had”.⁶⁷¹ Kohl repeated the afore mentioned argument in a conversation with American columnists during the same trip, noting:

“On NATO and security policy, Schmidt and I agree on paper. He had no majority, I have it. I am more engaged on European affairs. On the Ost- and Deutschlandpolitik, I am much more skeptical. Maybe I am more engaged in the Deutschlandpolitik because I react from my own experience. Schmidt had to accept many compromises in his party. The party chairman of Helmut Schmidt is Willy Brandt, my party chairman is Helmut Kohl.”⁶⁷²

Even in hindsight, Kohl’s statement is quite remarkable. A Christian Democratic chancellor essentially argued that he broadly speaking continued the policies of his social democratic predecessor (who, it has to be said, though, had lost big parts of his own party for the same underlying reason). Kohl’s statement is even more perplex considering that the Christian Democrats had argued that their efforts to ensure continuity was part of the party’s longstanding tradition of Adenauer’s *Westpolitik* rather than a continuity of the Social-Liberal coalitions.⁶⁷³ While there was more emphasis on the Federal Republic’s bond with the West, especially the United States, there was also a high degree of continuity from the previous Social-Liberal government - not least because Hans-Dietrich Genscher assured continuity in the foreign ministry, but also because key personnel in the Chancellery, especially in the section *Deutschlandpolitik*, stayed on.⁶⁷⁴ The difference in the *Deutschlandpolitik*, according to Kohl, was that the new government was working under the premise that it had to get something back from the GDR in terms of for example credits.⁶⁷⁵ Rhetorically, Kohl also promised to take a more confrontational stance with the GDR over its human rights violations. The word “unification” was nowhere to be found in Kohl’s first governmental declaration, however.

Kohl’s statement in Washington D.C. also highlighted another interesting aspect of continuity. While the two Helmut’s could hardly have been more different in terms of personality and style, their political messaging was oftentimes very similar. For example, Kohl’s emphasis on conscientiousness, reliability, feasibility and steadfastness were literally the same virtues Schmidt so

⁶⁷¹ Heinrich August Winkler, *Geschichte des Westens* (C.H.Beck, 2016), 863.

⁶⁷² BArch, B136-16835, „Gespräch mit Kolumnisten, Montag 15. November 15.30-16.45 Uhr“.

⁶⁷³ Korte, *Deutschlandpolitik*, 92.

⁶⁷⁴ Potthoff, *Mauer*, 206. Genscher is eager to highlight his persona as integral for the continuity in his memoirs. See Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 477.

⁶⁷⁵ BArch, B136-16835 „Pressekonferenz am Montag 15. November 1982, 22.30 Uhr, im Hotel Watergate in Washington“, 15.11.1982. As Kohl’s chancellorship would show, the new government would indeed use its economic and political leverage to pressure East European governments on a variety of issues such as human rights, migration, trade, economics and bilateral relations in general.

often had cited and which had made him deeply unpopular with the SPD's left wing.⁶⁷⁶ Kohl's reflections in Washington D.C. are thus both an interesting manifestation of the closeness of not only the two chancellors' rhetoric but also of the moderate wings of the SPD and CDU. As a contemporary assessment in the late 1970s, after Kohl had lost the federal election to Schmidt in 1976, observed: "Although *Ostpolitik* remained an issue between the SPD and the CDU/CSU, and indeed between the CDU and the CSU, it was not a decisive one. On *Ostpolitik* Kohl and Schmidt were more pragmatic and less far apart than Kiesinger and Brandt."⁶⁷⁷

The change of guards

The change in the Chancellery came amidst an "extremely difficult phase" of East-West relations, as an internal assessment had put it.⁶⁷⁸ During their preparations to welcome the new chancellor the head of the foreign policy and security section department in the chancellery, Otto von der Gablentz, had advised Helmut Schmidt to stress to his successor, that it was paramount for the security and standing of the Federal Republic how the West would handle "the double crisis in the global economy and hardening of East-West relations".⁶⁷⁹ The most sensible course to master this difficult situation, it was advised, was to stress continuity and remain in close coordination with the allies, especially France and the U.S., and go through with NATO's dual track decision.

It appeared that Kohl would follow these principles. Analyzing Kohl's first governmental declaration and contrasting it with Schmidt's last governmental declaration from 1980, the differences were minor. Kohl had put more emphasis on a strong *Westpolitik*, articulating relations with the European Community and the United States and considered the deterioration of U.S.-Soviet détente before confirming his government's embrace and continuation of *Ostpolitik*.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁶ Winkler, *Westen*, 860.

⁶⁷⁷ William E. Griffith, *The Ostpolitik of the Federal Republic of Germany* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1978), 230. For the inner-party fights see Clemens *Reluctant Realists* and Zimmer, *Nationales Interesse*, 69-111. In this context it is worth to remember, as chapter two has stressed, that even Kiesinger and Brandt – who had been foreign minister under Kiesinger – were not that far apart in their conceptions.

⁶⁷⁸ BArch, B136-17367, „Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit dem Ministerpräsidenten der RSFSR, Solomenzew, am 7.10.1982“, 4.10.1982.

⁶⁷⁹ BArch, B136/16550, "Punkte für ein Gespräch bei der Amtsübergabe aus dem Bereich der Abteilung 2", 4.10.1982.

⁶⁸⁰ Helmut Kohl: „Regierungserklärung, 13. Oktober 1982“: http://www.1000dokumente.de/pdf/dok_0144_koh_de.pdf (accessed 5.8.17).

For the new CDU/CSU-FDP government, it was agreed during the coalition negotiations that Kohl's governmental declaration would serve as the basis for the government's foreign policy.⁶⁸¹ The foundation thus became rather narrow since foreign policy only had occupied a minor part in the declaration, which primarily had emphasized domestic developments. During the coalition negotiations it was furthermore agreed that specific foreign policy details would not be discussed at this point. This meant that the existing disagreements between the different parties, especially between the CSU and the FDP, were postponed or ultimately sat out. One example of this was the criticism from CSU-chairman Strauß during the coalition negotiations, that he had not been in opposition over *Ostpolitik* for thirteen years only to continue the policy once in government. Strauß's outburst prompted a strong response from the FDP, who insisted that *Ostpolitik* was not to be negotiated.⁶⁸²

The decision to not settle or discuss existing disagreements in favor of the swift formation of a new government had two main advantages for Kohl and Genscher. The speedy coalition negotiations, which lasted less than two weeks - a rarity in West German history - signaled the new coalition's ability to quickly act and confront the "double crisis". In addition, the postponing meant that the differences of opinion either were sat out or would be discussed later among a small selected few in the Kohl-Genscher years (just as Kohl had preferred to conduct business during the Christian Democrats' opposition period). The decision to centralize the foreign policy process furthermore helped to isolate Strauß and the Christian Democrat's right-wing.⁶⁸³ It was thus the perfect solution for both Kohl and Genscher. As Kohl would later recount in his memoirs, the solution to the ongoing foreign policy quarrels between Strauß and Genscher – which Genscher describes at length in his memoirs while Kohl calls them "obvious" (*offenkundig*) - was to hold regularly meetings with the chairmen of the parties and parliamentary groups plus the chancellor, foreign minister, and minister of defense to discuss the operational foreign policy (*operative Außenpolitik*).⁶⁸⁴ In fact, however, the decision making process was even more centralized. According to Genscher, foreign

⁶⁸¹ AdL, Bestand FDP-Fraktion im Bundestag, A49-38, „Kurz- und Beschlußprotokoll der gemeinsamen Sitzung von Fraktion und Bundesvorstand am 23.03.83“, 98.

⁶⁸² BArch, B136-16579, "Hoppe: Die FDP besteht auf Kontinuität in der Ost-Politik“, 15.12.1982.

⁶⁸³ See also Wirsching, *Provisorium*, 48.

⁶⁸⁴ Genscher, *Erinnerungen*. See for example 457 and 470-471. Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982-90* (München: Droemer, 2005), 490.

policy decisions were primarily made over the phone and in direct talks between him and Kohl.⁶⁸⁵ It was a decision the foreign minister welcomed.⁶⁸⁶

For the new chancellor, the decision also had its advantages. While Kohl was known for keeping his own positions “deliberately unclear”, the CDU-chairman was politically closer to Genscher and his FDP on matters of *Ostpolitik* and détente than to Strauß and the Christian Democrat’s right-wing.⁶⁸⁷ As Erik Lommatzsch has put it, “as chancellor Helmut Kohl had, apart from the FDP, always another coalition partner. But the difference to the FDP was that he did not choose this one himself”.⁶⁸⁸ That the FDP had made it a precondition for a change of government that Strauß would not become a minister in a CDU/CSU-FDP government and also insisted on foreign policy continuity, further complicated rapprochement between the Christian Democrats moderate and right-wing factions.

The new chancellors’ initial appointments also pointed towards steering the course and accommodating the FDP at the cost of the CSU. The appointment of Alois Mertes as *Staatssekretär* (minister of state) in the foreign ministry indicates as much. Mertes had been among the most outspoken Christian Democratic proponents of coming to terms with the Social-Liberal coalitions *Ostpolitik*,⁶⁸⁹ Kohl’s decision to appoint Rainer Barzel as minister for inner-German relations – Barzel later became president of the Bundestag in 1983 – also indicated a course of moderation. Only the chancellors’ decision to appoint his longtime aide Horst Teltschik as undersecretary in the Chancellery – thereby rejecting the historic precedent of appointing an experienced official from the ranks of the foreign ministry - caused controversy within the ranks of the foreign ministry and between Genscher and Kohl.⁶⁹⁰ The controversy was in other words about personal and not policy - Teltschik belonged the moderate fraction within the CDU – i.e. Kohl’s decision to upend the traditional way of doing things.

⁶⁸⁵ Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 472.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 470.

⁶⁸⁷ The formulation is from Dennis L. Bark and David Gress, *History of West Germany 2nd Edition Set* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 391. Erik Lommatzsch comes to a similar conclusion in Philipp Gassert, and Hans Jörg Hennecke (eds.), *Koalitionen in Der Bundesrepublik* (Brill Schoeningh, 2017), 91.

⁶⁸⁸ Lommatzsch in Gassert and Hennecke (eds.), 185.

⁶⁸⁹ Schneider, *Alois Mertes*. Previously, Kohl had also been in a coalition government with the FDP while being minister president of the state Rhineland-Palatinate.

⁶⁹⁰ While Genscher does not mention the episode in his memoirs, Kohl is very outspoken about the tensions Teltschik’s appointment caused in his memoirs. See Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982-90*, 44-45.

Political preferences

That Kohl explicitly urged voters in the 1983 election to give their second vote to the FDP in order to secure the liberals continued representation in the *Bundestag* was another example of the chancellor's political preferences.⁶⁹¹ For the sake of stability, Kohl rather wanted to have the FDP on board in order to secure his power base in the long term and moderate the Union's right-wing, especially the CSU, than winning an absolute majority and risking that Franz Josef Strauß - who already had conducted his own shadow foreign policy during the first Kohl-Genscher government as seen with the secret negotiations with the GDR's Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski - would become foreign minister in a CDU/CSU majority government.⁶⁹²

Overall, the new government thus acted in the name of continuity while only having committed itself to guidelines and no clear programmatic and concrete projects. Since the coalition negotiations between the Union and the FDP had only lasted for a mere ten days, this was hardly surprising – especially since there was a high degree of agreement between the Christian Democrats and FDP, the controversies with the CSU notwithstanding.⁶⁹³ If this had not been the case, the FDP would not have been inclined to change horses in midstream. As Kohl noted in his memoirs, “the consensus on economic- and fiscal policy was large (*groß*), but also on foreign- and security policy, there was broad agreement (*weitgehende Einigkeit*).⁶⁹⁴

The second coalition negotiations in March 1983 after the coalitions resounding reelection, provide further insight into the internal discussions over foreign policy. On March 19, 1983 the issue of intra-German relations was discussed.⁶⁹⁵ The discussion both revealed the consistency of Kohl's reasoning on intra-German relations and how much emphasis the FDP put on foreign policy continuity, not least to manifest *Ostpolitik* as its political trademark and brand itself as the harbinger of stability.⁶⁹⁶ The chancellor opened the conversation by highlighting the importance

⁶⁹¹ Bark and Gress (eds.), 387

⁶⁹² Hans-Dieter Heumann, *Hans-Dietrich Genscher* (Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2011), 54; Kohl *Erinnerungen 1982-90*, 29.

⁶⁹³ Winkler, *Westen*, 862.

⁶⁹⁴ Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1930-82*, 631.

⁶⁹⁵ AdL, Bestand Genscher, N52-550, "Protokoll Nr. 6: Koalitionsgespräch am 19. März 1983, Bonn, Bundeskanzleramt 16.00 Uhr bis 19.15 Uhr“, 107 and 110-121.

⁶⁹⁶ The FDP was the only party who had government responsibility in the twenty-year era of *Ostpolitik*. Unfortunately, there is still no single monograph that analyzes the liberal party's *Ostpolitik* during the Cold War end especially from 1969-1989.

of a common *Deutschlandpolitik* and the importance of both the preamble of the federal constitution and the existing Eastern Treaties as the legal and political underpinnings for the FRG's *Ostpolitik*.⁶⁹⁷ The only one who uttered his dissatisfaction with the chancellor's remarks, according to the protocol, was CSU-chairman Strauß. The CSU-chef lamented that he had had no influence on the formulations in the first governmental declaration, which he found to be too vague and merely phrases.⁶⁹⁸ At this point, Genscher immediately made it clear that he viewed continuity in the *Deutschlandpolitik* as a crucial foundation for the political collaboration.⁶⁹⁹ What Genscher was implying was of course that without continuity there would be no CDU/CSU-FDP government. Less than ten days later, Genscher told his parliamentary group and *Bundesvorstand* that the coalition's talks again had highlighted that "the chancellor is interested in continuing the foreign policy continuously."⁷⁰⁰ The FDP thus served a dual role for Kohl: it was both crucial to secure Kohl's rule electorally, in terms of increasing the Christian Democrats' political maneuverer room (*politische Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten*), and as a bulwark against the CSU, as Kohl acknowledged in his memoirs.⁷⁰¹

Genscher was not the only one who contradicted Strauß though. The discussion in the chancellery in March 1983 also serves as an illustration of the struggle for influence and highlights the different power centers both within the government and within the parties. During the negotiations, the CSU had expressed a wish to revise the intra-German related parts of the governmental declaration.⁷⁰² Strauß had also stressed that he viewed increasing freedom more important than German unity (*Freiheit vor Einheit*) and expressed the idea that economic relations could lead to gaining more influence on the GDR-regime.⁷⁰³ The CSU-chairman did not get any support for his arguments during the negotiations, though, not even from his fellow Christian Democrats. Rainer Barzel would later highlight in a reply to the lamenting Strauß, that the Christian-

⁶⁹⁷ AdL, Bestand Genscher, N52-550, "Protokoll Nr. 6: Koalitionsgespräch am 19. März 1983, Bonn, Bundeskanzleramt 16.00 Uhr bis 19.15 Uhr", 110.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid, 110-111.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid, 112.

⁷⁰⁰ AdL, Bestand FDP-Fraktion im Bundestag, A49-38, „Kurz- und Beschlußprotokoll der gemeinsamen Sitzung von Fraktion und Bundesvorstand am 28.03.83“, 95.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid. See also Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982-90*, 29.

⁷⁰² AdL, Bestand Genscher, N52-550, „VI. Deutschlandpolitik“ (Bonn, 21. März, 1983), 11 and 26.

⁷⁰³ AdL, Bestand Genscher, N52-550, "Protokoll Nr. 6: Koalitionsgespräch am 19. März 1983, Bonn, Bundeskanzleramt 16.00 Uhr bis 19.15 Uhr", 113. The latter point is especially interesting considering Strauß's subsequent prominent role in the Milliardenkredite and the debates in the Kohl government over increasing economic assistance to the GDR. On this, see Stephan Kieninger, *Freer movement in return for cash Franz Josef Strauß, Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski, and the Milliardenkredit for the GDR, 1983–1984* in Blumenau, et al (eds.), *New Perspectives on the End of the Cold War*.

Liberal coalition had inherited an intra-German relationship that was legally settled.⁷⁰⁴ It was thus not coincidental that Genscher had highlighted the part of the intra-German relationship in the governmental declaration, Barzel noted. The new government had formulated its similarities in the governmental declaration bearing in mind that disagreements existing between the three parties. The essence of the governmental declaration was, however, to stress what the parties could agree on, not to showcase its disagreements.⁷⁰⁵ The emphasis should thus be on the continued will to make the division of Germany more bearable for the people and ultimate try to unite the nation (with no further details of what this meant exactly).⁷⁰⁶ Making the situation more bearable was a mantra that Kohl would articulate again and again and already had emphasized in his first governmental declaration in October 1982.⁷⁰⁷

In the early phase of the Kohl-Genscher government, it appears that Genscher and his foreign ministry were in a strong position.⁷⁰⁸ The FDP-chairman profited not only from his experience but also that Kohl “lacked the interventionist bent and broad policy grasp of his immediate predecessor as chancellor.”⁷⁰⁹ Having been foreign minister since 1974 and being unmatched in his foreign policy expertise, Genscher was seen by many as the personification of continuity domestically and abroad. As president Carter’s former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote to Genscher in early October: “I am delighted that your steady hand will remain in charge of Germany’s foreign policy. Everyone in the West must be pleased.”⁷¹⁰ It was an image that not least Genscher himself wanted to entertain and did so explicitly in his memoirs.⁷¹¹ Indeed, in many of the existing Genscher biographies, one can get the impression, that Genscher’s primary job was to clean up the mess of his various bosses in the chancellery, as one reviewer wrote after having read a fairly recent Genscher biography.⁷¹² This heroization of Genscher often fails to account for the evolution of Genscher’s own role during the era of *Ostpolitik*. During the Social-Liberal coalition, the foreign minister’s role had both been that of ostpolitikal supporter but also of a counterweight to the SPD,

⁷⁰⁴ AdL, Bestand Genscher, N52-550, ”Protokoll Nr. 6: Koalitionsgespräch am 19. März 1983, Bonn, Bundeskanzleramt 16.00 Uhr bis 19.15 Uhr“, 113.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid, 111.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid, 110-112.

⁷⁰⁷ See for example Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1930-1982*, 590-591.

⁷⁰⁸ Genscher cultivates this image in his memoirs as well. See for example Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 469-470. Also Heumann, *Genscher*, 54.

⁷⁰⁹ Paterson in Padgett (eds), *Adenauer to Kohl*, 136.

⁷¹⁰ PA AA, Band 124932, Letter from Zbigniew Brzezinski to Hans-Dietrich Genscher, October 4, 1982

⁷¹¹ See also Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 476.

⁷¹² Klaus Wiegrefe, Neue Genscher-Biografie: Der Vertrauensmann (*Spiegel Online*, 22.11.2011): <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/neue-genscher-biografie-der-vertrauensmann-a-799004.html> (accessed 20.5.2018).

highlighting the need for a strong *Westbindung*. During the Kohl era government, Genscher's role often became that of an "impeller", which helped to sharpen the FDP's political profile.⁷¹³

Articulating 'renewed continuity'

The second coalition negotiations also were conducted swiftly. Similar to the first negotiations, they lasted around two weeks. On March 21, 1983, an internal FDP-paper noted that the new governmental declaration would likely confirm the old one. The day after, the leadership of the CDU, CSU and FDP meet in the Chancellery to discuss foreign- and security policy as part of their second coalition negotiations.⁷¹⁴ The meeting proved interesting in many ways. First, there is the issue of who spoke (at great length) and who did not. Strauß again dominated the meeting and spoke at great length about the necessity of a "realistic détente" for East-West relations.⁷¹⁵ According to the CSU-chairman, the Americans had made the mistake of giving the Soviet Union the impression of a general parity through the parity in arms control negotiations, quoting lengthy passages of an unknown paper. To this Genscher replied that he agreed with Strauß, also on the point of U.S.-Soviet parity. Primarily, Genscher noted in a not so subtle dig at the CSU-chairman, "because nothing was new in what he had said."⁷¹⁶ Genscher however strongly rejected the idea that the time had come for "something new."⁷¹⁷ On the contrary, the FDP-chairman stressed that for him the policy of détente – according to the protocol the preferred term was *Entspannungspolitik* - was both "indivisible" (*unteilbar*)" and "unstoppable" (*ununterbrechbar*).⁷¹⁸ Expanding on these points, Genscher noted that the two mantras – "indivisible" and "unstoppable" - had caused dissent in the old Social-Liberal coalition but Genscher had insisted that it was ill-advised to depart from détente's basic objectives, hence the term "indivisible". The term "unstoppable", Genscher explained, signaled that it could not

⁷¹³ Bender, *Neue Ostpolitik*, 218-219. Bearing this in mind it is, again, quite paradoxical, that while Genscher's role has been treated extensively, the FDP's overall role in ensuring ostpolitikal continuity is generally underdeveloped in the existing literature.

⁷¹⁴ AdL, Bestand Genscher, N52-550, "Protokoll Nr. 8: Koalitionsgespräch am 22. März 1983, Bonn, Bundeskanzleramt 19.00 Uhr bis 20.15 Uhr", 84-89.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 87-89.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷¹⁸ As we saw in a previous chapter, Genscher did not in fact believe this to be the case – and also had no issue accepting this as long as the European détente and especially German *Ostpolitik* remained in place - but kept insisting on it for political reasons.

be in the German interest to go back to a status of Cold War.⁷¹⁹ In other words: the FDP-chairman believed that détente had transcended the Cold War. Genscher's remarks stood in stark contrasts to Strauß and the CSU general secretary's Edmund Stoiber's who both had called for significant changes in the FRG's Eastern policy. Just the week before the meeting in the Chancellery, Stoiber had stressed in an interview with the German tv-magazine *Tagesschau* that the CSU's expectations to the Bonn government of course were that "we naturally have a whole number of correctives and changes to install, and we are going to hold on to these now."⁷²⁰

According to the protocol, Helmut Kohl never gave his opinion on the matter. On the contrary, the CDU-chairman shifted the topic of conversation after the tense exchange between Strauß and Genscher and referred to an upcoming party chairman meeting and the need to talk about Afrika and China. This did not mean, though, that Kohl's own position in the dispute was unclear. Two days after the resounding electoral victory in March 1983, Kohl had told his Christian Democratic companions during a parliamentary group meeting that the CDU/CSU-FDP government should be the start of a "new era" but not a fundamental turn. This was a remarkable since Kohl previously had campaigned on the need for a political caesura. Once in power, however, the new government would pursue centrist politics – *Politik der Mitte* - and depended on a coalition with the FDP.⁷²¹ Kohl's remarks were a clear statement aimed at Strauß and the CSU and an obvious rebuff of any significant ostpolitikal changes the CSU had demanded. In terms of foreign policy and *Ostpolitik*, Kohl continued to honor the September/October 1982 agreements with the FDP that no changes would come about in the *Deutschlandpolitik* and foreign policy; a concession that had been crucial for the FDP's decision to jump the Schmidt ship and paved the way for Kohl to become chancellor.⁷²²

Articulating continuity and renewal in foreign policy was a two-edged sword for the Christian-Liberal government. While it was a priority for the new government to act in a predictable way and honor the Eastern Treaties, the international situation also demanded that the message of continuity was articulated with varying degree and intensity in meetings with allies and antagonists, which the following case studies will highlight. Each of them highlights a different aspect of the first six months of the Kohl-Genscher government. The meetings with American counterparts shed light on the attempt to restore German-American relations – and transatlantic relations more general - while

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, 87-88.

⁷²⁰ BArch, B136-18124, "Dr. Edmund Stoiber zu den Erwartungen der CSU für Bonn", *Tagesschau*, 14.3.1983.

⁷²¹ Quoted in Wirsching, 47.

⁷²² Ibid, 48.

dealing with conceptual differences and diverging political priorities on several issues, especially détente. The Soviet meetings illustrate the Federal Republic's view of the nature and state of the Soviet system and both the Western and Eastern sides' rationale for pursuing a policy of détente. At the same time, the Soviet meetings also highlight how Kohl and Genscher attempted to be constructive and willing to continue the dialogue and trade with the Soviets in the face of the mounting Soviet pressure over the likely implementation of NATO's dual track decision. Finally, the meetings with the FRG's French counterparts provide a glimpse into the different takes on détente in Western Europe, where the French had become more skeptical than the Germans. Taken together, these meetings thus provide us with an in-depth account of the Kohl-Genscher government's first ostpolitik initiatives from a multi-angle perspective.

“Unwavering reliability and stability”? German-American encounters and assessments

The arrival of a more pro-American chancellor, many observers hoped, would remove the cloud over transatlantic relations. But while the entrance of the less confrontational and more staunchly pro-American Helmut Kohl indeed contributed to the development of better personal relations on the highest level of government, transatlantic disagreements persisted. The change of government contributed to improve the transatlantic atmosphere, but it would be a stretch to speak about an abrupt turnaround in German-American relations altogether. Schmidt, after all, had been a staunch Atlanticist as well. What Kohl could provide, however, contrary to Schmidt, was reliability and loyalty, which was valued by the Reagan administration. The new chancellor could however not avert, that transatlantic disagreements persisted on several issues. The change of guards in Bonn did, of course, not remove the fundamental diverging political interests, differing conceptual approaches to détente, and the clash of political cultures that were at the heart of the German-American relations in the early 1980s.⁷²³

⁷²³ In fact, many of these disagreements had existed for a long time and persist to the present day.

The Hermes memo

On October 25, three weeks after Helmut Kohl had been inaugurated as the Federal Republic's sixth chancellor, the German embassy in Washington D.C. sent its assessment of the state of U.S.-German and U.S.-European relations to the foreign office.⁷²⁴ Entitled "Problem areas (*Problembereiche*) in German(European)-American relations", the German ambassador Peter Hermes wrote at length about the issues that Kohl and Genscher would face during their meetings in the U.S. the upcoming month.

Overall, Hermes, wrote, "the European-American relationship was burdened with differences in the assessment of détente and methods of *Ostpolitik*."⁷²⁵ In Hermes view, the Reagan administration viewed the Soviet's military buildup and advancement in the third world as proof that the Soviets were not interested in "real détente" (*echter Entspannung*).⁷²⁶ The Soviet advancement was further blamed on previous U.S. administration's failures. While the achievements of détente for the Europeans were acknowledged by the U.S., the results were also "relativized" since they had little importance for the U.S. itself in terms of America's global perspective of Western interests, Hermes wrote.⁷²⁷ The German ambassador highlighted a crucial point: the different geopolitical perspectives that shaped transatlantic attitudes towards détente. From an American point of view, détente had not brought the desired results for U.S.-Soviet relations. For the Germans, European détente had produced remarkable results on a regional level. As Raymond Garthoff has stressed, détente in Europe "became much more of an organic process."⁷²⁸ The German problem was, of course, that they would – or for political reasons could - not acknowledge this dilemma even though they were painfully aware of it. While insisting publicly on the inseparability (*Unteilbarkeit*) of détente, Europeans were indeed primarily interested in the "the regional perspective of détente," as Genscher would later acknowledge in his memoirs.⁷²⁹

⁷²⁴ PA AA, Band 124929, Peter Hermes, "Betr.: Problembereiche in den Deutsch (Europaeisch)-Amerikanischen Beziehungen", Washington D.C., October 25, 1982.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Ibid.

⁷²⁷ Genscher argued in a similar vein in his memoirs. Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 474.

⁷²⁸ Garthoff, 500-501.

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

The struggle for a common strategy

There were indeed plenty of conceptual and political disagreements between the two administrations. The week before the first meeting between chancellor Kohl and president Reagan, Peter Bazing from the foreign office's planning staff (*Planungsstab*) travelled to Washington D.C. to meet with officials in the policy planning staff at the State Department.⁷³⁰ Bazing's meetings were part of an ongoing informal U.S.-German planning staff effort to meet twice a year to exchange opinions on a wide range of issues. Bazing stressed that "it would be desirable (*wünschenswert*) in important areas, which have caused problems for German-American relations recently, to discuss the arguments (*Sachargumente*) in greater detail."⁷³¹ These "principal questions" demanded "individual analyses" rather than just "statements", the German official wrote.⁷³² For example, Bazing noted, would it be interesting to get some American reactions on the concrete political and economic arguments that Genscher had put forward in his recent Foreign Affairs magazine article about the need for a common and long-term Western strategy towards the Soviet Union in the 1980s.⁷³³ The article, the foreign ministry's documents show, had been written especially with an American audience, especially the Reagan administration, in mind in order to highlight the need for a common West-East strategy.⁷³⁴

After returning to Bonn, Bazing's assessment was bleak. In his view, it was impossible to develop a long-term strategy for East-West relations with the Reagan administration, that was not focused on punishments but on steps that "advance our own goals".⁷³⁵ In his conversations with his American counterparts, the German policy planner did not feel that his arguments were perceptive.⁷³⁶ About James Roche, the state department's deputy director for policy planning, Bazing wrote that Roche's interest in knowing how others "assessed political trends is rather small. His views with regard to the principal questions that are important for the Europeans, for example the organization

⁷³⁰ PA AA, Band 178441, Peter Bazing. „Vermerk Betr.: Meine Gespräche in Washington 8-11.11.1982“, Bonn, 14. November 1982

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ Hans-Dietrich Genscher, "Toward an Overall Western Strategy for Peace, Freedom and Progress" (*Foreign Affairs*, fall 1982): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1982-09-01/toward-overall-western-strategy-peace-freedom-and-progress> (accessed 18.5.2018).

⁷³⁴ See especially PA AA, Band 178861 about the German considerations behind Genscher's article.

⁷³⁵ PA AA, Band 178441, Peter Bazing. „Vermerk Betr.: Meine Gespräche in Washington 8-11.11.1982“, Bonn, 14. November 1982.

⁷³⁶ For good recent studies on transatlantic divergences, see for example Bartel *The Triumph of Broken Promises* and Tyler Esno, Reagan's Economic War on the Soviet Union (*Diplomatic History* 42, no. 2, April 2018), 281–304.

of East-West economic relations, is narrow and sometimes simplistic.”⁷³⁷ The German diplomat’s conclusion from his talks with members of the planning staff was that the State Department’s influence had been “greatly relativized” even though the arrival of George Schultz had helped revitalize the State Department’s influence on Reagan’s decision making somewhat.⁷³⁸ Shultz’s influence notwithstanding, however, William Clark, President Reagan’s national security advisor, continued to be the most influential advisor.⁷³⁹

Confusing communications

The main task for Kohl and Genscher, in the face of the above described disagreements and the previous ruptures during the Social-Liberal government, was thus to regain American trust. Regaining trust was especially important amid the backdrop of Helmut Schmidt’s trouble to control his party’s increasingly critical stance towards the implementation of NATO’s dual track decision, which had led to American fears of neutralist tendencies in the FRG. The concern for a continued rupture in German-American relations was so outspoken that Kohl reassured the American ambassador Arthur Burns that the chancellor’s frequent meetings with Soviet officials after resuming office “did not leave the wrong impression” of the new government’s stance.⁷⁴⁰ Defense minister Manfred Wörner even spoke of a “essential change of course” from the new government towards a clear pro-Western stance without any neutral or equidistance tendencies in words and deeds when visiting Washington.⁷⁴¹ While Wörner’s depiction and subtle hint at the SPD’s leftward drift likely primarily was directed towards an domestic German audience, the defense ministers exaggeration of the degree of neutralist tendencies in the FRG played well into American fears of the same.

Besides the fear of neutralist tendencies, the Reagan administration was also concerned with the increasing anti-American tendencies in the Federal Republic. In order to calm down American nerves, the Kohl-Genscher government attempted to reassure the American government by repeatedly highlighting opinion polls, showing strong U.S. backing in German population. While

⁷³⁷ PA AA, Band 178441, Peter Bazing. „Vermerk Betr.: Meine Gespräche in Washington 8-11.11.1982“, Bonn, 14. November 1982.

⁷³⁸ For Schultz’s influence see Kieninger, *The Diplomacy of Détente*.

⁷³⁹ PA AA, Band 178441, Peter Bazing. „Vermerk Betr.: Meine Gespräche in Washington 8-11.11.1982“, Bonn, 14. November 1982.

⁷⁴⁰ AADP 1982, 1353.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid*, 1544.

Kohl also reassured George Shultz about the predominantly pro-U.S. climate in the FRG, he also stressed his willingness to lobby for more pro-American sentiments, urging the U.S. to send high profile Americans to West Germany to counter Soviet propaganda.⁷⁴² It was also hardly coincidental, that Kohl omitted the most U.S. critical and cautious points about German domestic politics, which had been circled out in the final draft for Kohl's first meeting with Reagan, when he met the president. For example, the notion that Kohl's election had prevented a coalition between the SPD and the Greens, which "greatly would have endangered the continuity, especially in terms of security policy" was omitted in the meeting.⁷⁴³

The German chancellor also wanted to tell Reagan that the next year, 1983, – with the likely enforcement of the dual track decision – was going to be a decisive year for the Atlantic Alliance and that existing disagreements thus had to be removed before.⁷⁴⁴ The prepared talking points from German officials thus advised the chancellor to confirm the continuity in foreign and security affairs and the Federal Republic's firm rooting in the Western and European alliance, most likely to forego any discussions about neutralist tendencies. The restoration of a pro-Atlantic and west-oriented West German foreign policy was another talking point from the governmental declaration that Kohl was advised to stress in his meeting with Reagan.⁷⁴⁵ Practically, this for example meant that Kohl would articulate the FRG's willingness to increase its payment to NATO's infrastructure in times of domestic financial constraints on the German budget.⁷⁴⁶

The above described American fears and prepared German talking points also highlight the inherent paradox in coming to Washington with a message of continuity. How could the new chancellor channel continuity in foreign policy terms when he at the same time portrayed himself and his administration as change, namely the enforcer of a more pro-U.S. and pro-Western foreign policy?

The continuity through change-theme figured prominently in the new government's high-level contacts with the Reagan administration. Just a few days after the change of guards, Genscher told secretary of state Shultz in their meeting in New York that "no change of course was

⁷⁴² AADP 1982, 1609-1613.

⁷⁴³ PA AA, Band 124929, "Punktation für Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit Präsident Reagan am 15.11.1982 in Washington", Bonn, November 4, 1982.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁶ AADP 1982, 1544-1546.

to come in foreign policy.⁷⁴⁷ Rather, Genscher stressed to Shultz, the foreign- and security policy would be “continued continuous”.⁷⁴⁸ Taken literally, the statement was rather perplexing and went against the idea of renewal and restoration that Kohl later would be advised to stress when meeting Reagan in November.⁷⁴⁹ Ultimately, continuity was thus essentially used as a synonym for being predictable and reliable by Genscher. The same two characteristics were also the mantra Kohl stressed with Reagan, both in private and in public. In the end, the intended message apparently resonated, at least in media circles. An editorial in the Washington Post the day after Kohl’s departure from Washington D.C. noted on the new chancellor’s embracement of being a factor of stability in a time with a powerful SPD left wing: “Kohl speaks to the fear of the Germans of becoming, one of the biggest fears if not to say obsessions, of postwar German politicians. The impression, Kohl wanted to leave, was that of unwavering reliability and stability.”⁷⁵⁰

Reaffirming the dual track decision

Being a reliable partner also meant leaving no doubt that NATO’s dual track decision would be implemented. The strong initial reaffirming by the chancellor and foreign minister was welcomed by Shultz in his first meeting with Genscher in New York.⁷⁵¹ The German embassy in Washington delivered the same message after its assessment of Kohl’s Washington visit.⁷⁵² Concerning the implementation of the dual track decision, Kohl’s hope was that steady German support would advance the Dutch, Italian and Belgian position on the matter in a positive way, creating a domino-like effect.⁷⁵³ This assessment was shared by leading officials in the Reagan administration such as Richard Perle.⁷⁵⁴

⁷⁴⁷ AADP 1982, here p. 1362. Again, one could ask, how should this reassure an administration that had become increasingly dissatisfied with the previous West German government.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹ BArch, B136-16834, „Punktation für Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit Präsident Reagan am 15.11.1982 in Washington“.

⁷⁵⁰ BArch, B136-16835, Pressestimmen zu Kohls USA-Besuch, November 1982.

⁷⁵¹ AADP 1982, 1360-1367.

⁷⁵² BArch, B136-16835, „Betr.: besuch vom Bundeskanzler Kohl in den USA vom 14-16.11.1982, Bewertung des Besuches aus Washingtoner Sicht“, 19.11.1982.

⁷⁵³ AADP 1982, 1330-1334. For the debate in other European countries see Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles*.

⁷⁵⁴ AADP 1982, 1523.

At the same time, it was paramount for the West German government that the U.S. was sincere about achieving a result during the arms talks in Geneva if it wanted to defend the implementation domestically. How important this was had already been stressed by Kohl's predecessor in his last meeting with the American ambassador to Germany in September and was also stressed continuously by the new government.⁷⁵⁵ Otherwise, Kohl and Genscher's mantra that the West would only execute the deployment if all other options had been explored and exhausted, would be difficult to defend. The German concern was, especially in the light of the Reagan administration's military buildup, that the U.S. was not sincere about achieving arms reductions. Part of Kohl's visit thus served to underline the importance of close consultations and reminding President Reagan of the importance of serious INF-negotiations on the behalf of the United States.⁷⁵⁶

Kohl had to tread carefully, however. As Peter Hermes had noted in his assessment of U.S.-German relations in late October 1982, the ongoing criticism and insinuations that the Americans were not really interested in negotiating in Geneva let some powerful people in Washington question whether the Federal Republic would follow through on its promise if the Geneva talks had produced no result by the end of 1983.⁷⁵⁷ The Americans were further concerned that a substantial part of the now-opposition – here obviously referring to the SPD – would not back the previous Social-Liberal's choice to support the dual track decision.⁷⁵⁸

Rhetorically, the new government was advised to circumvent the political dilemma by using the term *Gesamtstrategie* instead of *Doppelstrategie* since the Reagan administration, at least rhetorically, was not interested in pursuing both the deterrence and détente element of the Harmel Report, it was believed.⁷⁵⁹ For Genscher however, both elements were crucial – in his words, the Harmel Report was “the Magna Carta”.⁷⁶⁰ Over the course of the next months, these German concerns continued to figure prominently in internal debates. The German government also repeatedly

⁷⁵⁵ AADP 1982, 1289-1295. See also 1544-1547 and 1726-1734.

⁷⁵⁶ PA AA, Band 124929, “Punktation für Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit Präsident Reagan am 15.11.1982 in Washington“, Bonn, November 4, 1982.

⁷⁵⁷ PA AA, Band 124929, Peter Hermes, “Betr.: Problembereiche in den Deutsch (Europaeisch)-Amerikanischen Beziehungen“, Washington D.C., October 25, 1982.

⁷⁵⁸ As time would tell, the American concern turned out to be justified.

⁷⁵⁹ BArch, B136/16550, Memorandum from von der Gablentz to Herrn St Stolze, 14.10.1982.

⁷⁶⁰ Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 466.

conveyed to the Reagan administration that a direct U.S.-Soviet meeting would be beneficial for the overall state of East-West affairs.⁷⁶¹

Leaving the twilight zone?

The forthcoming implementation of the dual track decision, American doubts connected to the FRG's steadfastness vis a vis Moscow, a U.S. call for increased European defense spending after the 1982 U.S. midterm election, and the domestic pressures from the left made it crucial that Kohl and Genscher succeeded in reassuring the Reagan administration during their first months in office.⁷⁶² For German-American relations this meant that continuity was not per se always the keyword but rather one of many buzzwords that had to be stressed together with the themes of willingness, reliability and steadfastness. A disproportional focus on continuity could have been counterproductive and would also have been inconsistent, considering that Kohl in his governmental declaration had stated that he wanted "to free" (*befreien*) German-American relations from the "twilight" (*Zwielicht*) and "confirm and stabilize the friendship".⁷⁶³ Likewise, the governmental declaration's foreign policy section touted the aim to "renew" (*erneuern*) "the foundations of German foreign and security policy".⁷⁶⁴

Reaffirming continuity while at the same time promising a change, i.e., a new, more pro-U.S. course, was – taken literally - an illogical communicative strategy. This was nevertheless how the new government articulated its foreign policy in its first high-level meetings with its American counterparts, thereby themselves at times highlighting the transatlantic disagreements. For example, on November 14, foreign minister Genscher met his counterpart Shultz on the sidelines of Leonid Brezhnev's state funeral in Moscow. Chancellor Kohl was on his way to meet President Reagan in the U.S. the day after. Shultz noted that Reagan wanted to lift the U.S. sanctions on Europe prior to the meeting in order to improve the atmosphere; obviously a gesture of goodwill

⁷⁶¹ Genscher's assessment in mid-November 1982 was that the Reagan administration was interested in keeping the line of communications open with Moscow. See: PA AA, Band 178472, Hintergrundgespräch des Bundesministers des Auswärtigen, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, am 16. November 1982, Bonn 18. November 1982.

⁷⁶² BArch, B136-17056, "Betr.: Gespräch zwischen BK Kohl und fünf US-Senatoren", 6.11.1982. An example is AADP 1982, 1410-1414.

⁷⁶³ See also the talking points for Kohl's meeting with U.S. journalists. PA AA, Band 124935, "Betr.: USA-Reise des Bundeskanzlers (14.-16. November 1982)", Bonn, November 9, 1982. In his memoirs, Kohl also speaks about his "intensive efforts for a new, crucial security and disarmament policy. See Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982-90*, 11.

⁷⁶⁴ PA AA, Band 133179, "Regierungserklärung".

on the administration's behalf. Genscher on the other hand emphasized to his American colleague that the German government placed "considerable importance" (*erhebliche Bedeutung*) on the CSCE follow up meeting and stressed the need for a common East-West strategy.⁷⁶⁵ When Shultz met Kohl and Genscher in Bonn the following month, the prepared talking points again stressed the need for a common Western strategy for East-West relations; a topic of transatlantic divergence.⁷⁶⁶

One should thus not be left with the impression of sudden American-German agreement and bilateral harmony after the change of guards.⁷⁶⁷ As one newspaper noted in aftermath of the chancellors U.S. visit: "Kohl's visit was in terms of hearty pleasantries and reassurances such a success, that the inattentive observant might observe only complete agreement. This would be a grave mistake."⁷⁶⁸ Just as it had been the case under Helmut Schmidt, the U.S. and West Germany did not see eye to eye on détente. While it is true, as John Young has argued, that these differences on East–West relations were based on questions of tactics rather than fundamental values, the tactical differences were a byproduct of different political cultures that were rooted in certain beliefs – and thus values – as well. This was especially the case in the assessments of economic relations with the East and the CSCE process. This being said, the advantage for German-American relations was that both the chancellery and the White House had a clear-eyed assessment of the situation and understood that these political differences existed and would continue to do so when dealing with the Eastern Bloc, while trying to smoothen relations and improve public perceptions.

Calculating costs and benefits of détente

Being clear-eyed was no guarantee for bridging political disagreements, however. As meetings between German and American officials in the months before and after the change of guards underlined, the two countries did not see eye to eye on a host of economic issues. Chancellor Kohl was thus advised to refrain from bringing up economic relations with the Soviet Union in his talk

⁷⁶⁵ PA AA, Band 124932, "Gespräch mit AM Shultz am 14.11.1982 in Moskau um 18.00 Uhr bis 18.40 Uhr (von BM noch nicht genehmigt)", Moscow, November 15, 1982.

⁷⁶⁶ BArch, B136-17056, „Pressekonferenz am 7. Dezember 1982, 15.35 Uhr, Pressehaus 1“, 7.12.1982, see also the meeting between Kohl and Shultz in the same folder.

⁷⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, the Soviet diplomat Awerjanow repeatedly emphasized the tensions in his talks with Schollwer. See for example PA AA, Band 178472, Wolfgang Schollwer, "Betr.: Gespräch mit dem Ersten Sekretär der sowjetischen Botschaft, W. W. Awerjanow, am 23.12.1982.", Bonn, 27. Dezember 1982.

⁷⁶⁸ BArch, B136-16835, Pressestimmen zu Kohls USA-Besuch, November 1982.

with Reagan. Omitting the issue did however not mean to give in. If the topic came up, Kohl was advised to stress that the proclaimed continuity in West German foreign policy also included economic relations. The Federal Republic was a country lacking national resources with an export-based economy and thus more dependent on exports than the US, it was pointed out.⁷⁶⁹ As Josef Joffe observed after Kohl's trip to the United States: "Mr. Kohl's conservatives will (not) abandon... *Ostpolitik*...(national interests don't change as quickly as government's)...(but) they will calculate the costs and benefits of detente more closely than the party of Willy Brandt."⁷⁷⁰

The interest in saving détente, at least in Europe, was also seen in the German evaluation of the discussions for a new Western East-West strategy. It had proved difficult to find a transatlantic consensus for some time and overall, the talks about a global East-West strategy between Germany, France, Great Britain and the United States had become a pattern of, as one memorandum in the German foreign office put it, "the character of a 3-1 dispute" with the Europeans often arguing against the United States.⁷⁷¹ Part of the struggle was whether economic relations between East and West had to be included and counted as a stabilizing factor, according to the Germans.⁷⁷² How important the economic cooperation with the Soviet Union was for the Federal Republic is illustrated by an exchange between state secretary Berndt von Staden and the American congressman Stephen Solarz. On Solarz's question where the Germans would draw the red line for continuing their economic cooperation with the Soviet Union, von Staden quoted former chancellor Schmidt: "a Soviet invasion of Poland would mean the end the policy of cooperation".⁷⁷³

The lenient German approach to political punishing and using sanctions has to be seen as part of a wider transatlantic disagreement over the effects of economic cooperation. From a German perspective, economic relations had to be seen within the wider picture of East-West détente. For the Germans, trade was a stabilizing factor, something they firmly believed in and were willing to challenge the United States on. The German ambition was not only to prevent the U.S. from pushing the Europeans to a "correction" in its détente with the East but to make the Americans more

⁷⁶⁹ Other areas of disagreement were the increasing trade disputes between the U.S. and the EEC relating to agriculture, steel and pipelines, the situation in Poland and American sanctions against alliance members in connection to the building of the West-Siberian Pipeline. Especially the French voiced their displeasure over the American course of action while the Germans often sought to meddle but being in principle agreement with the French.

⁷⁷⁰ BArch, B136-16835, Josef Joffe: „The Kohl visit and the German elections" (The Wall Street Journal, 24.11.1982).

⁷⁷¹ AADP 1982, document 1753-54. See also Christian Wenkel, *Overcoming the Crisis of Détente, 1979–1983: Coordinating Eastern Policies between Paris, Bonn, and London in The Long Détente*.

⁷⁷² PA AA, Band 124935, "Gesprächsvermerk, betr.: Gespräch des Herrn Staatssekretärs von Staden mit dem amerikanischen Kongress-Abgeordneten Stephen Solarz (D-New York) am 10.11.1982", Bonn, November 19, 1982.

⁷⁷³ Ibid.

responsive to the European détente, which was based on continuity and adjustment amidst difficult East-West conditions, an internal assessment in the foreign ministry stressed.⁷⁷⁴ The guiding factor for an overall East-West strategy should thus be in the interest of continuity and predictability and consist of a series of principles for East-West relations that transcended ideology and could outlast domestic changes rather than being questioned after changes of government, the assessment argued.⁷⁷⁵

“At best marginal, realistically a divergency”: who profits from the CSCE?

Transatlantic disagreements also persisted regarding the CSCE-process. The German assessment was that the Reagan administration`s willingness to be isolated with its hardline CSCE-stance within the transatlantic alliance was since there was little domestic pressure for the U.S. position, apart from the issue of sanctions where the administration had faced some pressure from the American business community. The crucial transatlantic disagreement between the two governments was, however, that the Reagan administration did not believe that the CSCE-process had advanced the West`s interests. In the American view, the Eastern Bloc ignored the Helsinki Final Act anyway.⁷⁷⁶ The German conception was the opposite. As noted in Kohl`s talking points for his meeting with the U.S. president, “the CSCE-process works in the Western interest and should thus be followed up actively.”⁷⁷⁷ Building on this assessment, it was the German belief that constructive dialogue had to be continued in international forums, especially in times of international upheaval. While Bonn was aware that the Soviets tried to use the CSCE to divide the West, the assessment from the German embassy in Moscow was that the Soviet interest in the CSCE was real because it “endorsed the European status quo”.⁷⁷⁸ Indeed, while various talks about arms control failed, the CSCE went on even in times of increased tensions. From a German perspective, the Helsinki Final Act had thus given

⁷⁷⁴ AADP 1982, 1535-1536.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid, 1536.

⁷⁷⁶ PA AA, Band 124929, Peter Hermes, “Betr.: Problembereiche in den Deutsch (Europaeisch)-Amerikanischen Beziehungen“, Washington D.C., October 25, 1982.

⁷⁷⁷ PA AA, Band 124929, “Punktation für Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit Präsident Reagan am 15.11.1982 in Washington“, Bonn, November 4, 1982.

⁷⁷⁸ PA AA, Band 178472, Hermann Huber, „Betr.: Jahresbericht ``Lage der Sowjetunion Ende 1982``, Moskau 16.12.1982.

the West an important “instrument for a dynamic détente policy”.⁷⁷⁹ While the FRG placed great importance on the Helsinki Final Act and the CSCE follow up meetings, these were viewed as being only of secondary interest for the Reagan administration and primarily as a human rights forum.⁷⁸⁰ In the words of one American official the process was “at best marginal, realistically a divergency.”⁷⁸¹

The U.S. view was that the CSCE-process was part of an overall failure of détente with the Soviets. The achieved improvements on a range of matters through the CSCE – politically, economically, humanitarian and security-wise – only played a minor role in the Reagan administration’s overall global assessment of the Soviet behavior, the German ambassador to the U.S. noted.⁷⁸² The ambassador’s cable quoted a high ranking unnamed state department official who in his talks with the Germans had argued that the Helsinki Final Act had worsened East-West relations because the Soviets had accepted a final act it was not going to honor no matter what and thus also made U.S.-Soviet agreements on for example arms control more difficult.⁷⁸³ This was not the German position. The German view can be best summed up by a quote from the historian John Lewis Gaddis, albeit Gaddis was referring to U.S.-Soviet détente: “détente did not free the world from crises, but the new spirit of cooperation did seem to limit their frequency and severity.”⁷⁸⁴

“Not more willing to compromise but nicer to deal with”: early German-American relations under Kohl and Genscher

The Kohl-Genscher government pursued a dual strategy in its first meetings with the American counterparts. On one hand, the Germans opted for a strategy of largely omitting controversial topics to create a good atmosphere. On the other hand, they aimed at defending its broad continuation of the Schmidt-Genscher government’s foreign policy by stressing the importance of being a predictable and trustworthy actor in times of international upheaval. As Kohl emphasized in

⁷⁷⁹ PA AA, Band 178514, „Betr.: Informelles Treffen der NATO-Außenminister am 2./3.10.1982 in Kanada“, written by Ischinger, Bonn, September 10, 1982.

⁷⁸⁰ AAPD 1982, document 328. See also document 1753-54. For a good account on Reagan and human rights see Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁷⁸¹ Quoted in AADP 1982, 1705.

⁷⁸² AADP 1982, 1705.

⁷⁸³ Ibid. For a comprehensive assessment see Morgan, *The Final Act*.

⁷⁸⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (Penguin, 2005), 198.

his first meeting with Eugene Rostow, the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, while he did not negotiate the Eastern Treaties “they are now the foundation for our continuity. And this would also have to be understood in Washington.”⁷⁸⁵

The insistence on honoring existing treaties as a means of being a predictable and reliable actor emerged as one of the key points the new government made in its talks with the Americans and helped to some extent to smoothen potential conflicts. That the new government deployed this line of argument was not surprising, considering that the phrase “predictability” already had been coined under the previous Schmidt-Genscher government.⁷⁸⁶ Kohl and Genscher were just going back to the future, so to speak. Indeed, predictability was given special emphasis by Genscher at every possible opportunity.

Overall, and notwithstanding Kohl’s quite confrontational statement in his talk with Rostow, the new government’s approach to its most important ally was often more a matter of changing tone than of substance. The Reagan administration was well aware of this. As an American diplomat told the Washington Post: “these people are really a bunch of nice boys...they differ from Schmidt’s people...they may not be any more willing to compromise but they are nicer to deal with.”⁷⁸⁷

The ‘play nice’-approach played well with Kohl’s consensus driven approach while also paying tribute to Germany’s increasingly powerful position and interests in maintaining good relations with its Eastern neighbors. As Reagan’s former national security advisor Richard Allen had noted at the time: “across the board, the Kohl regime will begin the difficult process of trying to synchronize its outlook and policies better with those of the United States. But Kohl will not, as some SPD and German leftist critics already charge, come to Washington to get his marching orders.”⁷⁸⁸ Kohl put indeed great importance on the fact that the FRG and the U.S. had talked as “equal partners” after meeting Reagan, another sign of the growing German confidence in international affairs.⁷⁸⁹ Also before travelling to Washington, Kohl had in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Welt* stressed that “in German-American relations, there is neither an order-taker nor an order-giver.”⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁵ AADP 1982, 1414.

⁷⁸⁶ Bark and Gress (eds.), 454.

⁷⁸⁷ BArch, B136-16835, „Betr.: Washington Post am 14.11.1982 zur bevorstehenden reise des Bundeskanzlers nach Washington“, 14.11.1982.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁹ BArch, B136-17056, „Stichworte für einleitende Erklärung bei PK im Watergate-Hotel am 15.11.1982“, 15.11.1982.

⁷⁹⁰ BArch, B136-17056, „Kohl: He likes us“ by Richard V. Allen, Washington Post.

Germany's new powerful role is central when trying to understand how German-American relations improved initially under Kohl and Genscher despite the continued presence of significant disagreements. Improving the atmosphere while standing firm on the *ostpolitikal* consensus was no small feat considering the disagreements durability ever since the initiation of the *Neue Ostpolitik* under Brandt and Bahr. The new government's approach also underscored, as Jussi Hanhimäki's has put it, that "although Brandt signed numerous agreements with his counterparts in the East, they were, in the end, less important for what they stated or recognized than for the contacts and processes that were begun."⁷⁹¹ How significant these disagreements actually were, was summed up by Richard Allen, who at the time noted in an op-ed: "over the past decade, relations between Germany and the United States have frequently been strained despite strong ties that bind these two countries. Especially in recent years, the two allies have begun to develop conflicting conceptions of Germany's future course in dealing with the Soviet Union."⁷⁹²

To sum up, the deep-rooted cultural and political differences straining the relationship between the United States and the Federal Republic did not disappear with Helmut Kohl's entrance. But Kohl's entrance made it easier to accommodate these differences. At the same time, the idea that the early Reagan years were the "unnoticed apogee of Atlanticism", at least when looking specifically at U.S-German relations.⁷⁹³ The future task for the Kohl-Genscher government was now to continuously reassure the Americans and highlight the need for the continuation of *détente* in Europe.⁷⁹⁴

"No cyclical matter": German-Soviet meetings

Calling for a renewal of the foundations of German foreign and security policy through a revitalization of the transatlantic alliance could have profound implications for West German *Ostpolitik*. The Kohl-Genscher government thus made it clear early on that it wanted to pursue good

⁷⁹¹ Hanhimäki in Westad and Leffler (eds), *Volume 2*, 217.

⁷⁹² BArch, B136-17056, „Kohl: He likes us" by Richard V. Allen, Washington Post.

⁷⁹³ N. Piers Ludlow, The unnoticed apogee of Atlanticism? US-Western European relations during the early Reagan era" in Kiran Klaus Patel and Kenneth Weisbrode (eds.) *European Integration and the Atlantic Community in the 1980*" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷⁹⁴ BArch, B136-17056, „Punktation für das Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit AM Shultz am 7. Dezember 1982 in Bonn“.

relations with Moscow, stressing the continuity of *Ostpolitik*.⁷⁹⁵ Adhering to the Harmel Report's dual strategy of deterrence and détente was at the forefront of the new government's first encounters with the Soviet Union. This was both the message Genscher had for foreign minister Gromyko in New York on October 5, just as Kohl stressed the same in his first meetings with prime minister Michail S. Solomenzew and ambassador Vladimir Semyonov. As the German embassy in Moscow stressed to its Soviet counterparts three weeks after the formation of the new government, it had been a key priority for the new government to rapidly clarify the continuity in West German foreign policy to high-ranking Soviet officials in politicians.⁷⁹⁶

Meeting the ambassador

In his first meetings with Soviet officials after being inaugurated, Helmut Kohl was advised to stress the new government's continuity and desire to work on the basis of the existing treaties.⁷⁹⁷ Accounting for the Christian Democrats' *ostpolitikal* evolution during the long 1970s, the CDU-chairman was also advised to highlight that while his party had previously criticized certain aspects of the previous government's *Neue Ostpolitik*, his party had also stressed that one of its core principles for foreign affairs was to work on the basis and acceptance of the existing treaties.⁷⁹⁸ While signaling continuity and reliability by honoring the Eastern Treaties and the Helsinki Final Act, Kohl's honoring also had the - from a West German perspective - advantage of making it more difficult for the Soviets to apply repressive measures in the Eastern Bloc.⁷⁹⁹

The new chancellor followed his officials' advise in his meeting with the Soviet ambassador Solomenzew, who himself had put great emphasis on the mutual benefits the Federal Republic and the Soviet Union had gained through détente.⁸⁰⁰ Germany's position as a frontline state

⁷⁹⁵ See for example, BArch, B136-17367; BArch, B136-17637, BArch, B136-17368, BArch, and B136-30172 (2 von 2), See also PA AA, Band 133179, "Betr.: Höflichkeitsbesuche des Leiters der 3. Europäischen Abteilung im Sowjetischen Außenministerium, Bondarenko, am 14.10, 18.00 Uhr, bei Ihnen und am gleichen Tage um 15.00 Uhr bei D2", Bonn, October 14, 1982.

⁷⁹⁶ PA AA, Band 133179, "Betr.: Deutsch-Sowjetische Beziehungen", Moskau, October 20, 1982

⁷⁹⁷ AADP 1982, 1338-40 and 1368-72.

⁷⁹⁸ BArch, B136-17367, „Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit dem Ministerpräsidenten der RSFSR, Solomenzew, am 7.10.1982“, 4.10.1982

⁷⁹⁹ Zubok in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3, Endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 97.

⁸⁰⁰ Kohl's recapitulation of the meetings can be found in his memoirs and resemble predominantly the official record. Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982-90*, 38-40.

meant that it had “a vital interest” in preserving the improvements that the Eastern Treaties had given to both the people in the divided Germany and Europe, Kohl stressed.⁸⁰¹ Being a reliable and calculable actor was thus paramount for constructive FRG-Soviet relations, according to the chancellor.⁸⁰² Kohl’s assurances were welcomed by Soviet leaders who perceived the treaties as the “granite guaranty” for the further development of Soviet-FRG relations.⁸⁰³ Kohl however also made it clear that being a reliable partner meant honoring other existing agreements and being a loyal member of the Western alliance. The dual track decision was thus not up for reconsideration if the talks in Geneva produced no satisfactory result. The CDU-chairman also stressed that the federal government would continue to work towards German unity, “well knowing that in the current global situation there was no chance to change the current state of affairs in a peaceful way.”⁸⁰⁴

In this context, it is interesting to read Kohl’s latter attempt to rewrite the history of his first meetings with Soviet diplomats. Writing in his memoirs, Kohl argued that the purpose of the meetings had been to highlight the “main features” (*Grundzüge*) of the new government’s foreign policy that differed from the previous Social-Liberal government’s foreign policy.⁸⁰⁵ As the archival record however shows, there is no evidence that Kohl did so. In fact, he had been instructed – and adhered to – to stress the exact opposite of political differences: political continuity. Indeed, Kohl attempts to rewrite history in hindsight echo Christian Hacke’s contemporary assessment in the late 1980s – uttered with regard to Kohl’s *Deutschlandpolitik* – that while there was a lot of “operative continuity” (*operative Kontinuität*) under the Christian-Liberal government there was also lot of “declaratory change” (*deklaratorischer Wandel*).⁸⁰⁶

Just after his meeting with Kohl, Solomenzew had a luncheon with foreign minister Genscher.⁸⁰⁷ The foreign minister recapped his meeting with Gromyko two days earlier in New York and stressed the new government’s continuity and long-term outlook, a cornerstone of West German

⁸⁰¹ BArch, B136-17367, „Gespräch des Herrn Bundeskanzlers mit dem Ministerpräsidenten der RSFSR, Solomenzew, am 7.10.1982“, 4.10.1982

⁸⁰² AADP 1982, 1338-1340.

⁸⁰³ AADP 1982, 1370. See also 1572-78.

⁸⁰⁴ PA AA, Band 133179, „Vermerk über das Gespräch des Bundeskanzlers mit dem Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates der RSFS M. S. Solomenzew am 7. Oktober 1982 von 12.45 bis 13.45 im Bundeskanzleramt“. Bonn, 7. Oktober 1982.

⁸⁰⁵ Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982-90*, 40.

⁸⁰⁶ Hacke „Die Deutschlandpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland“ in Werner Weidenfeld and Hartmut Zimmermann (eds.), *Deutschland-Handbuch: Eine Doppelte Bilanz 1949-1989* (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1989).

⁸⁰⁷ PA AA, Band 133179, „Vermerk über das Gespräch beim Mittagessen von BM Genscher für den Ministerpräsidenten der RFSR, Solomenzew, am 07.10.1982, 13.30 Uhr, im Gästehaus Venusberg“, Bonn, 7 Oktober 1982.

foreign policy, noting “it is the goal of the federal government to further develop relations with the Soviet Union on the basis of the existing treaties, since the federal government’s policy is oriented towards the long-term. German foreign policy is characterized by continuity.” Indeed, Genscher stressed later in the conversation, referring to the *Neue Ostpolitik*, “it has to be recognized that the policy initiated in the 1970s is long-term oriented. It is not a cyclical matter. This is our foundation.”⁸⁰⁸ The Soviet delegates likewise emphasized their strong interest in continued political dialogue and economic cooperation. Just as the Germans, the Soviets placed considerable emphasis on maintaining and practicing continuity especially in terms of high-level dialogue. According to the German ambassador in Moscow, Andreas Meyer-Landrut, the continued high-level dialogue was of foremost importance to the Soviet leadership. For the new Kohl-Genscher government, frequent high-level dialogue could serve as an illustration of *ostpolitikal* continuity. Consequently, both sides put great emphasis on the importance of the early Genscher-Gromyko meeting and the coalition government lobbied extensively for another meeting between the two foreign ministers in Bonn as soon as possible.⁸⁰⁹ The Soviets were however not committing themselves immediately to another meeting, which prompted great many speculations about the Soviets motive in the foreign ministry.⁸¹⁰ When Gromyko finally came to Bonn in January 1983, the visit was followed by controversy, as we will see.

The new government was acutely aware that the Soviets kept close eyes on its first moves and utterances. While the initial Soviet reactions to the new West German government had been characterized by restraint and friendly words, the initial honeymoon quickly faded. An assessment from the German embassy in Moscow one month after Kohl’s inauguration noted that the Soviet rhetoric had become more critical of the Federal Republic again. The German explanation was that the government had been steadfast on its determination to implement NATO’s dual track decision if necessary and thus had to “be punished”. But while the dual track decision was the most controversial and most pressing issue in FRG-Soviet affairs, the Chancellery had assessed that even the stationing of American missiles on German soil would constitute “no make or break issue” for the bilateral relationship. The Soviet wish for continuity in bilateral affairs was too strong, it was

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁹ PA AA, Band 133178, “Betr.: Deutsch-Sowjetische Beziehungen einen Monat nach der Neubildung der Bundesregierung“, Moscow, November 1, 1982.

⁸¹⁰ PA AA, Band 133178, “Betr.: Bisherige sowjetische Reaktionen auf die Einladung von BM Genscher an AM Gromyko zu einem Besuch der Bundesrepublik Deutschland möglichst noch in diesem Jahr“, Bonn, October 29, 1982.

believed, and Soviet foreign policy had always been characterized by its realism and the ability to adjust to new developments.⁸¹¹

The strong Soviet reaction still apparently caught the Germans by surprise. A cable from the embassy in Moscow wondered in early November:

“Even though every Federal government since 1970 has clearly highlighted on the highest political level and on every other level our firmly embedment in the Atlantic alliance as the foundation for our Ostpolitik, some circles in Moscow had apparently still entertained expectations of equidistance.”⁸¹²

Two weeks after the preliminary assessment, an abrupt change in Soviet leadership prompted new assessments of the state of German-Soviet relations and East-West relations more broadly.

From Brezhnev to Andropov

On 10 November 1982, Leonid Brezhnev died aged 75 after suffering a heart attack following years of serious ailments. The death of the general secretary prompted numerous analyses in the German foreign ministry, analyzing Brezhnev's legacy and what the change of leadership would mean for East-West relations. As assessment written the day after Brezhnev's death, were his death had been officially acknowledged by the Soviet media, emphasized that the general secretary had been “no dictator in the style of Stalin”.⁸¹³ Through his 18-year rule, Brezhnev had conducted a pragmatic policy of “objective needs” that was not guided by ideology and which had elevated the Soviet Union to become the second world power through a massive military buildup and the expansion of Soviet influence worldwide, especially in the Third World, the German assessment noted. Foreign policy wise, Brezhnev had been risk averse and an architect of the détente era and the Brezhnev doctrine. In its outlook, the internal analysis argued that there was no convincing evidence that the change in leadership would result in a change in Soviet policy.⁸¹⁴

⁸¹¹ BArch, B136/17486, „Deutsch-sowjetische Beziehungen“, 24.2.1983.

⁸¹² PA AA, Band 133178, “Betr.: Deutsch-Sowjetische Beziehungen einen Monat nach der Neubildung der Bundesregierung“, Moscow, November 1, 1982.

⁸¹³ PA AA, Band 133178, “Zum Tod von GS Breschnew – Rückblick und Ausblick“, Bonn, November 11, 1982.

⁸¹⁴ Ibid.

Another internal assessment two weeks later supported the previous analysis. The quick election of Yuri Andropov as Brezhnev's successor was interpreted as a sign to display leadership and the continued ability to act. The new general secretary's leitmotif was described in one word: continuity. Building on this assessment, the foreign ministry's hope was that the succession opened for long-term efforts to stabilize East-West relations and improve US-Soviet relations. As the paper noted: "in our opinion this moment is suitable for both sides to try to develop more constructive East-West relations again".⁸¹⁵ Bilaterally, Andropov would just like his predecessor attempt to influence the FRG's dual track decision, aim to expand the existing economic cooperation, and seek opportunities to divide the U.S. and Western Europe, the assessment predicted.⁸¹⁶

For Brezhnev's state funeral, foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and federal president Karl Carstens travelled to Moscow. On the sidelines of the funeral, they meet with the new general secretary. The Federal Republic's president stressed the importance of the bilateral relationship and highlighted the German wish to show and stress continuity by attending the funeral with a high-level delegation. The new chancellor Kohl, who was on his way to the U.S. to meet president Reagan, extended his greetings and his strong wish to maintain the dialogue, the president noted.⁸¹⁷ The new Soviet leader stressed to his German counterparts how important it was after the change of leadership in both countries to be careful with "all that had been achieved in joint effort". While Andropov complimented the Christian-Liberal's government declaration, he also warned that the words in the declaration "had to be backed up by deeds". In a similar vein, Andropov cautioned that he did not want to discuss significant disagreements on the sidelines of a funeral; only to bring up the possible forthcoming stationing of American missiles on German soil anyhow. The general secretary reaffirmed that the Soviets did not want to interfere in internal affairs - which was just what Andropov was about to do. If the missiles were indeed stationed in the fall of 1983, he warned, "international and European relations could not develop in the same way as if nothing had happened". Rather, there would be "a new situation" and the Soviets would have to "draw their conclusions", another thinly veiled threat towards the new Kohl-Genscher government. Instead, the "Federal Republic could use its influence" to prevent a new arms race, Andropov argued.⁸¹⁸

⁸¹⁵ PA AA, Band 133178, „Betr.: Die Sowjetunion nach Breschnews Tod“, November 23, 1982.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

⁸¹⁷ PA AA, Band 133178, „Betr.: Gespräch des Herrn Bundespräsidenten mit dem Generalsekretär der ZK der KPdSU Juri Andropow am 15. November 1982 in Moskau“, Bonn, November 16, 1982.

⁸¹⁸ All quotes in this paragraph are from PA AA, Band 133178, „Betr.: Gespräch des Herrn Bundespräsidenten mit dem Generalsekretär der ZK der KPdSU Juri Andropow am 15. November 1982 in Moskau“, Bonn, November 16, 1982.

Genscher and the „policy of outreach”

One month after the confrontational meeting with Andropov, Genscher met the Soviet ambassador Semyonov. The foreign minister primarily chose to emphasize areas of agreement, expressing that he was glad to hear that the Soviets aimed to safeguard the achieved results in East-West relations and also wanted to further develop relations. The week before, the German official Wolfgang Schollwer, who had been one of the most influential ostpolitikal voices in the FDP in the 1960s and since had been working in the planning staff in the foreign ministry, had received similar feedback from Soviet diplomat Awerjanow during their regular lunch meetings.⁸¹⁹ Genscher stressed that the West German government strongly believed in a policy of outreach (*Politik der ausgestreckten Hand*) and would consequently maintain its policy of securing peace, cooperation and détente. Genscher’s remark prompted an interesting exchange of opinions. After Genscher’s emphasis of the “*Politik der ausgestreckten Hand*”, the Soviet ambassador replied that the “Soviets would of course shake the *Politik der ausgestreckten Hand*”, which prompted an intervention by Genscher, who stressed “that is not enough!”⁸²⁰ As part of his attempt to safeguard détente in Europe, Genscher also stressed the importance of Gromyko’s upcoming visit to Bonn in January, noting that it would be the Soviet foreign ministers first visit in the West since Brezhnev had died. From the meeting with Gromyko the German government hoped to get insights into the Soviets ideas for the future of East-West relations, and the Soviet assessment of contemporary international questions and bilateral relations.⁸²¹

Outlining the overall status of the bilateral relationship, Genscher argued that there were areas with great perspectives for cooperation, areas with huge challenges where sober realism was in order and unpleasant areas where it was necessary to find common ground on how to move forward. On the most pressing topic, the INF-negotiations, Genscher affirmed that he was not as pessimistic as the Soviet ambassador and still hoped for a solution that would make the stationing of missiles on German soil obsolete. In fact, the Federal Republic would rather not have to do it, he

⁸¹⁹ PA AA, Band 178472, Wolfgang Schollwer, “Betr.: Gespräch mit dem 1. Sekretär der sowjetischen Botschaft, W. W. Awerjanow, am 06.12.1982.“, Bonn, 07. Dezember 1982. The Soviet praise actually caught Schollwer a bit by surprise, as he writes in his summary of the conversation, considering the Kohl-Genscher government’s initial ostpolitikal initiatives.

⁸²⁰ PA AA, Band 133178, “Vermerk über die Unterredung des Bundesministers mit dem sowjetischen Botschafter Semjonow am 16. Dezember 1982, 11.00-11.40“.

⁸²¹ Ibid.

stressed. But if the negotiations failed, Genscher emphasized, there should be no doubt in Moscow that the government would follow through with the stationing.⁸²²

Gromyko in Bonn

When Soviet foreign minister Gromyko arrived in Bonn in early January 1983, the atmosphere surrounding the German-Soviet relationship had become increasingly strained. In December 1982, the German deputy ambassador in Moscow, Hermann Huber, had sent the annual rapport (*Jahresbericht*) of the position of the Soviet Union to the foreign office.⁸²³ In his rapport, Huber observed that FRG-Soviet relations had been characterized by fluctuations domestically for both countries, with leadership changes, and that bilateral relations were running at a “slower pace” (*ruhigere Gangart*). Both sides were practicing a policy of continuity, albeit without high-profile visits. This, according to Huber, was expected after the many high-profile visits in 1981 and the setbacks in East-West relations, especially the Polish Crisis.⁸²⁴ As Huber noted in the section on U.S.-Soviet relations, “1982 was no good year for Soviet-American relations”.⁸²⁵ Considering the complicated international situation, the political task had been to secure the already achieved (*das Erreichte zu halten*). This task had been achieved on the political level; Huber wrote. There had been only minor *Deutschlandpolitische* and *Berlinpolitische* obstructions from the Soviets, while economic relations had been further developed. Also on the cultural level, there had been some “highlights”. The biggest German concern was the decreasing number of family reunifications. The number of German emigres from the Soviet Union had fallen drastically since 1976 and even more proportionally since 1981.⁸²⁶ In direct talks, the issue was repeatedly brought up but the Soviet counterparts tended to just reply formally.⁸²⁷ And despite Andropov’s reassurance on the sidelines of the Brezhnev funeral that détente was not historical reminiscent but rather an integral part of the future, Huber cautioned that Soviet attempts to split Western Europe and the United States would continue to figure prominently. While the Soviets did not view the ‘Finlandization’ of Western Europe

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ PA AA, Band 178472, Hermann Huber, „Betr.: Jahresbericht ``Lage der Sowjetunion Ende 1982``, Moskau 16.12.1982

⁸²⁴ Ibid.

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

⁸²⁷ Ibid.

as a realistic goal in the near future, the Soviet's had "with interest registered the growing contradictions between Western Europe and the USA" on issues such as the CSCE, economic policy, Poland, the dual track decision, and the peace movements.⁸²⁸

Two weeks earlier, Michael Libal from the foreign office had also produced a lengthy memo where he outlined the political options for West Germany's *Polen-Politik*. Libal concluded that the political maneuverer room (*Handlungsspielraum*) was "tightly limited" (*eng begrenzt*) due to the domestic instability in Poland, the need to act in transatlantic unity which resulted in a certain dependency on the Reagan administration's Poland policy, and the limited financial instruments at the FRG's disposal in the Polish Crisis.⁸²⁹ Considering these circumstances, the Polish Crisis also illustrated the importance of the CSCE. "As a result of détente, especially the CSCE", Libal wrote, "the East had to, albeit against its will, accept that the developments in Poland were a legitimate area of discussion. This is an essential difference to the crises of 1956 and 1968" (Libal's emphasis).⁸³⁰ Libal then divided the West German interests in Poland into subcategories. The political interest laid in "a strong, from the Soviet Union as little dependent as possible" Poland, while the economic interests dictated working "towards a restoration of Poland as a full and predictable trading partner". In the interest of "stable East-West relations in Europe", it thus should be prevented that Poland turned into the "sick man of Europe" and became a topic of bilateral contention among the European states. "Such a development would not help our gradually and patient attempts to make the division of Germany and Europe more tolerable. The chances of peaceful change in Poland would not increase", if Poland became the 'sick man of Europe', Libal stressed.⁸³¹

The Polish Crisis also caused the diplomats in the foreign ministry some headache regarding its impact on transatlantic relations.⁸³² "Our interest in continued credibility of our Ostpolitik demands that we avoid the impression, that we sacrifice the Eastern European peoples longing for freedom for our interest in good relations with the Soviet Union", the Libal memo emphasized. This comment is particularly interesting considering the comments state secretary Berndt von Staden had made to the American congressmen Solarz in Washington two weeks earlier, where von Staden had replied to Solarz that only a Soviet invasion of Poland would constitute a red

⁸²⁸ PA AA, Band 178472, Hermann Huber, „Betr.: Jahresbericht ``Lage der Sowjetunion Ende 1982``, Moskau 16.12.1982.

⁸²⁹ PA AA, Band 178514, Michael Libal, „Betr.: Perspektiven unserer Polen-Politik“, Bonn, Dezember 2, 1982.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² For a good overview on the transatlantic disagreements see Chiampan.

line for the FRG that would mean the end of economic cooperation with the Soviets.⁸³³ Libal thus proposed a cautious and consensus driven German approach to the Polish Crisis, arguing, “our interest in alliance consensus regarding Ostpolitik prohibits us to make the Polish question the cause of consensus endangering confrontations with the USA.”⁸³⁴ The view from the U.S. embassy in Bonn however was that West Germany “will resist any notion of “punishing” the Soviets.”⁸³⁵

The first three months since the change of the guards in Bonn in the fall of 1982 were thus characterized by a common West German and Soviet ambition to continue and advance the relationship based on the existing treaties (notwithstanding the strong rhetorical attacks on the FRG in the Soviet press, which the memo highlighted) while the new CDU/CSU-FDP government was aware that it had to patch up relations with the United States, which required a more cautious ostpolitikal approach and a strong rhetorical commitment to both the Western alliance and the implementation of NATO’s dual track decision. This had also been the ambition in Genscher’s meeting with Gromyko in Bonn in January 1983. At the meeting, the foreign ministers confirmed their hopes that the continued bilateral meeting could help improve the East-West dialogue.⁸³⁶ During the meeting Gromyko had also attempted to further differences within the Western alliance, just as Andropov had done it at the sidelines of the Brezhnev funeral. The Soviet foreign minister stressed that the Federal Republic should “orient itself on its own interests” and not the “whispering from third parties”, obviously referring to the United States. Genscher strongly rebuffed the Soviet foreign minister and made it clear to Gromyko that the FRG would neither loosen its membership in the Western alliance or its relationship with the United States.⁸³⁷

⁸³³ PA AA, Band 124935, “Gesprächsvermerk, betr.: Gespräch des Herrn Staatssekretärs von Staden mit dem amerikanischen Kongress-Abgeordneten Stephen Solarz (D-New York) am 10.11.1982“, Bonn, November 19, 1982.

⁸³⁴ PA AA, Band 178514, Michael Libal, „Betr.: Perspektiven unserer Polen-Politik“, Bonn, Dezember 2, 1982.

⁸³⁵ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California. Cable from Embassy Bonn, subject: “Genscher visit: possible FRG-U.S. differences in East-West relations”, February 3, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Records: Country File, RAC Box 12, Berlin (01/20/1981-01/21/1985) (1).

⁸³⁶ BArch, B136/17486, „Deutsch-sowjetische Beziehungen“, 24.2.1983.

⁸³⁷ Ibid.

`Doder-gate`

How sensitive the foreign ministry reacted to mischaracterizations of its relations with the East, also became visible after an incident in February 1983, which can be labelled `Doder-gate`. Earlier that month, the journalist Dusko Doder had written a piece in the Herald Tribune where he claimed that the Soviet Union had considerable influence over West German domestic affairs and could use political, economic, and institutional mechanisms to steer social unrest in the Federal Republic.⁸³⁸ Even worse, from the foreign ministry's perspective, was Doder's claim that West German politicians were aware of this constraint and acted accordingly. To quote Doder's article: "Moscow has substantial political, economic, and institutional resources to create major social turmoil within West Germany. The Russians believe that this is understood by all political figures in Bonn."⁸³⁹ The foreign ministry spent considerable resources to reject the journalist's claims, well aware of the consequences it could have for the conduct of transatlantic relations.

Amidst all the internal uproar over Doder's ludicrous assertions that the Soviets could de facto "Finlandize" the Federal Republic – which according to internal West German assessments even the Soviets themselves did not believe to be realistic - it was lost on the officials in the foreign ministry that Doder's polemical piece also had raised some interesting points. The most interesting observation was Doder's assessment of how uncontroversial Gromyko's visit to Bonn actually had been: "The extraordinary thing was that Mr. Gromyko could be in West Germany in the midst of an election campaign without arousing controversy and that this visit came at the initiative of the incumbent Christian Democratic government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl." The journalist was also correct in his observation that "the West Germans raised the question of Mr. Gromyko's visit to Bonn presumably because the Kohl government wanted to demonstrate that it was capable of continuing a dialogue with Moscow and thus acquire some political capital" as we have seen from the internal West German assessments.⁸⁴⁰

⁸³⁸ PA AA, Band 133178, "Betr.: Artikel von Dusko Doder „Russia Seems To Favor German Nationalism If Aimed Against U.S." in Herald Tribune vom 08.02.1983.

⁸³⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid.

The controversial article also featured an astute observation of the Soviets double game with the Christian-Liberal government. On one hand, the Soviet leadership stressed its wish to reaffirm its close contacts with the West German government regardless of the German government's political foundation. On the other hand, the Soviet's obviously were rooting for the SPD in the March 1983 election and made no efforts to hide their preferences for the social democratic chancellor candidate Hans-Jochen Vogel. On the contrary, they elevated Vogel to international prominence by inviting him to Moscow less than two months before the federal election. As Doder noted on the run-up to foreign minister Gromyko's visit to Bonn:

“Mr. Andropov immediately agreed, apparently to show his interest in continuing close contacts with the conservative government despite its pro-American tendencies. But the Russians promptly and discretely arranged for Mr. Vogel's visit to Moscow, and they treated him as a head of state. Not only did Mr. Andropov meet Mr. Vogel for two hours, more than any foreign leader thus far, but they also had a separate conversation without an interpreter present.”⁸⁴¹

That the Soviets preferred a social democratic chancellor was of course hardly a surprise. While Helmut Schmidt could hardly be described as a Soviet appeaser during his time in office, Schmidt had become increasingly out of touch with his left moving party base, which ultimately had cost him his chancellorship, and the Soviets naturally wanted to exploit the SPD's swing leftwards for its benefit.

West German foreign policy consensus

Two weeks before the federal election in March 1983, the Chancellery had produced its own assessment of FRG-Soviet relations. The review came ahead of Waldemar Schreckenberger's, the chef of the *Bundeskanzleramt*, meeting with the Soviet ambassador Semyonov. The memo stressed that despite the obvious and unbridgeable disagreements between the two states, it was in both countries interest, albeit for distinct reasons, to maintain dialogue and cooperation. Close relations could be used as a forum to present to the Soviets in direct talks the interests of the West and the FRG. Furthermore, it was in the German's interest to maintain “if possible, good relations” with

⁸⁴¹ PA AA, Band 133178, “Betr.: Artikel von Dusko Doder „Russia Seems To Favor German Nationalism If Aimed Against U.S.” in Herald Tribune vom 08.02.1983.

the Soviets who held the key to a future chance of German unification. Overall, the memo also asserted that the Soviet interest in pursuing closer relations was sincere, especially regarding economic relations. Helmut Kohl's reasoning was that the Soviets were realists and "cold calculators", prone to adapt to changing circumstances and change of government.⁸⁴² A key passage in the Chancellery assessment articulated the West German rationale for close economic cooperation: "with the economic cooperation, we pursue the goal of contributing to a stabilization of the East-West relationship and to prevent the emergence of a confrontational situation, that would benefit nobody."⁸⁴³ The view in Chancellery was thus close to that of the foreign office. Both believed that outside (economic) pressure would never materialize a change in Soviet behavior and that trade relations were profitable for both sides and contributed to political stability.⁸⁴⁴ The question is, of course to which extent this was the case in the long run.⁸⁴⁵ As the historian Vladislav Zubok has highlighted:

"The Soviet "welfare state" became dependent on external trade and on détente, even while the military buildup endangered that same détente...Détente became a substitute for domestic economic, financial, and political reforms. Soviet consumers and the Soviet state became more dependent on the capitalist world than at any other time in its history (with the exception of the war against the Nazis). Détente exposed the Soviet people to alternative ways of life, eroded the myth of Soviet exceptionality, and weakened the messianic spirit that had nourished the revolutionary-imperial paradigm."⁸⁴⁶

⁸⁴² AADP 1982, 1533.

⁸⁴³ BArch, B136/17486, „Deutsch-sowjetische Beziehungen“, 24.2.1983.

⁸⁴⁴ AADP 1982, document 343 see also PA AA, Band 124935, "Gesprächsvermerk, betr.: Gespräch des Herrn Staatssekretärs von Staden mit dem amerikanischen Kongress-Abgeordneten Stephen Solarz (D-New York) am 10.11.1982", Bonn, November 19, 1982.

⁸⁴⁵ This debate has, of course, become of central contemporary importance in the aftermath of Russia's attack on and (as of this writing) ongoing war against Ukraine since February 2022.

⁸⁴⁶ Zubok in Leffler and Westad (eds.), *Volume 3*, 95.

Early Soviet-relations under Kohl and Genscher

Overall, FRG-Soviet relations during the new government's first months in office can best be described as a mixed bag. Both sides had an interest in continuing the dialogue and expanding economic relations while at the same time also distancing themselves rhetorically from the other. For the CDU/CSU-FDP government, who had touted its aim to "renew" the transatlantic bond, being seen too close to the Soviets would have been counterproductive. At the same time, the new government's clear stance on the dual track decision created some natural distancing from the Soviet leadership. Simultaneously, the Soviet's preference for the Social Democrats naturally effectuated a more critical stance towards the new government.

The new coalition thus faced the same dilemma as the previous Schmidt-Genscher government. The task for Kohl and Genscher was to find the right balance between solidarity and alliance with the U.S vis a vis the continuation of *Ostpolitik* and détente in Europe with the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc.⁸⁴⁷ The new government was well aware of the daunting task. As Hans-Dietrich Genscher noted in a background talk with German journalists after his trip to Moscow in November 1982, ensuring West German foreign policy continuity was "the most important and best opportunity to contribute to stability." In Genscher's view, the Federal Republic could in such a transitional phase (*Phase des Überganges*) contribute to stability in East-West relations through a clear and predictable policy (*klare, berechenbare Politik*). Furthermore, it was important for the German government to encourage the United States and the Soviet Union to keep talking to each other, preferably on the highest political level, as Kohl had pointed out to Reagan during his Washington visit. This was the main idea behind Genscher's policy of "outreach" (*Politik der ausgestreckten Hand*): contribute to stability in times of uncertainty by acting predictable and reliable. To be sure, times would not become less uncertain after the Christian-Liberal coalition's resounding election at the polls in March 1983. The year 1983 would see an increased Soviet pressure on the Federal Republic that demanded German steadfastness and an acceptance that this steadfastness would likely result in a temporary cooling of bilateral relations, the foreign ministry had cautioned.⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴⁷ Banchoff, 97.

⁸⁴⁸ AADP 1982, 1741-1746.

“Clarifying real détente” and keeping the French in

Relations with the French Mitterrand government proved to be the least conflicted in the Kohl-Genscher government's first six months in office. The same night the new coalition had been confirmed in November 1982, Kohl and Genscher travelled to Paris. The symbolism was clear – the new government wanted to reaffirm the centrality of the German-Franco axis as a cornerstone in German foreign policy.⁸⁴⁹ The talking points prepared in the Chancellery stressed that the new chancellor's first meeting with President Mitterrand had two main objectives: “emphasize continuity” and “clarification of the concept of real détente” (*wirklichen Entspannung*), which Kohl had stressed in his governmental declaration.⁸⁵⁰

Clarifying the West German view on détente was especially important because the French had become increasingly skeptical of the merits of détente. Semantically, the Mitterrand government was contemplating to stop using the term détente in a positive fashion, just as subsequent American administrations had done. If France also scrapped the term, however, this would complicate the West German government's desire to portray continuity in its *Ostpolitik*.⁸⁵¹ One way to prevent this from happening, the Chancellery proposed, was to try to promote a common Western dynamic concept towards the East.⁸⁵² The Chancellery's memorandum thus also gives us a key insight into the West German thinking on *Ostpolitik* and détente and how it aimed to influence its closest European ally on the subject to pursue a more active, optimistic and dynamic détente amidst French pessimism. The German rationale was that the dialogue between East and West had to be continued, “let alone for the sake of the people in the divided Germany”. This was in line with the original reasoning behind the FRG's *Neue Ostpolitik*, which also had aimed to support a *Deutschlandpolitik* characterized by stronger bonds between the two German states in order to preserve some sense of belonging to a German nation until a future unification might be possible.⁸⁵³ In addition, also under Chancellor Kohl, the underlying rationale for the Federal Republic's *Ostpolitik* remained the logic of “mutual advantages” for both East and West.⁸⁵⁴ Mutual advantages notwithstanding, the policy of dialogue had to be conducted sober and without illusions about the expansionist nature and undermining aims

⁸⁴⁹ Kohl, *Erinnerungen 1982-90*, 35. Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 469-470.

⁸⁵⁰ BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: West-Ost Beziehungen“, 7.10.1982.

⁸⁵¹ BArch, B136-16921, „Betr.: Ihr heutiges Gespräch mit Präsident Mitterrand“, Bonn, 4.10.1982.

⁸⁵² BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: West-Ost Beziehungen“, 7.10.1982.

⁸⁵³ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁴ BArch, B136-16921, Betr.: Ihr heutiges Gespräch mit Präsident Mitterrand“, Bonn, 4.10.1982.

of the Soviet regime, though, the memo stressed. The setbacks in détente, which both countries had experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s were the result of the Soviets expansionist and undermining attitude and thus exclusively the Soviet Union's fault, the rapport argued.⁸⁵⁵ Despite these setbacks, the term "détente" (*Entspannung*) was not to be replaced or stopped being used, however. Giving up on the term would only give the Soviets the opportunity to (re-)define détente on its terms. Rather, the term "realistic détente" (*realistische Entspannung*) should be used.⁸⁵⁶ A synonymous term that was used was "real détente" (*wirkliche or echte Entspannung*), a term that had already been used by Christian Democratic Chancellor Ludwig Erhard back in the 1960s.

The foundations for a policy of real détente had been outlined in the Bonn declaration on June 10, 1982. Furthermore, a recently finished rapport by the German and French foreign ministries emphasized that détente had improved the situation of Berlin, lead to more human contacts and contributed to the establishment of a common European identity. There had of course been backlashes to détente as well, such as the ongoing crisis in Poland, the Soviet interventions in Afghanistan and Angola and the escalating arms race. The clear responsibility, the paper stressed, for these backlashes and the thawing of East-West relations laid with the Soviet Union.⁸⁵⁷ For the foreign ministry, it had been crucial to include a formulation in the German-French rapport that questioned to which extent détente policies could be faulted for the Soviet's behavior and not for example a lack of Western responses, as the Germans seemed to suggest in their memorandum. The joint rapport also stressed that *Ostpolitik* was a "long-term process" and, after some wrestling with the French diplomats over the exact language, that "East and West...had drawn common advantages from détente."⁸⁵⁸ Overall, the foreign ministry thus felt that its views were broadly represented in the rapport. The French-German paper also cited agreement on the future course of action. The East-West dialogue should be maintained, and a clear anchoring in the (Western) European community and the Atlantic alliance was the foundation for a successful West-East policy. The key to achieve this was to prevent disputes within the Western alliance over the differing Western assessments of the state of crisis in the Eastern Bloc. Close consultation within the alliance was thus key, according to the paper. "Especially in the West-East relationship is the political dispute based on political concepts and terms important, because it is a tool to win public opinion with," the paper noted. By omitting the term détente, the West would thus give the Soviets the chance to redefine the meaning of détente and

⁸⁵⁵ BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: West-Ost Beziehungen“, 7.10.1982.

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁷ BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: West-Ost Beziehungen“, 7.10.1982.

⁸⁵⁸ BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: Deutsch-Französische Bestandaufnahme der West-Ost Beziehungen“, 18.10.1982.

advance the impression that the Federal Republic was giving up on its dynamic and offensive policy. Rather, the West Germans wanted to “fill the term with its own content” and represent it “offensive”.⁸⁵⁹ The term “realistic détente” was thus coined as a counterreaction to the aggressive Soviet behavior in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁸⁶⁰

Building on these assessments, Helmut Kohl was advised to encourage the Mitterrand government to approach West-East relations more optimistic. The French’s own souring on détente was attributed to the French setbacks in its détente and domestic constraints in the form of Communists in Mitterrand’s cabinet. Another explanation, the German assessment put forward, might lay in the different importance the two countries subscribed to détente. For the French, like the Americans, détente was merely a short-term “condition”, while *Ostpolitik* for the FRG was a “political strategy”, a form of dealing with the Soviets that stressed “military equilibrium and Western unity and used dialogue and cooperation with the Soviet Union as means of a long-term policy”, according to the foreign ministry.⁸⁶¹ The French, on the other side, the foreign ministry speculated, would try to convince the Christian-Liberal government to opt for a “course change” on *Ostpolitik*, steering the new government towards a more defensive and less dynamic Eastern policy.⁸⁶² The devil was of course in the detail. While the Germans proposed to maintain the current offensive détente strategy but adjust the means in light of the Soviets “wrongdoing”, the French wanted to adjust the strategy both in terms of form and means in light of Soviet behavior.⁸⁶³ Politically, this not only meant a new vocabulary (abandoning the term détente) but also less high-level visits with the Soviets, the study concluded.⁸⁶⁴ In the end, the two parties achieved some form of consensus. The final French-German rapport found a formulation that, according to the Germans diplomats, “secured the FRG’s position, policy, and maneuver room within the most possible German-French agreement”.⁸⁶⁵

The French-German consultations also highlight another interesting disagreement within the transatlantic alliance in the early 1980s on how to best conduct relations with the Eastern Bloc. As we have seen, while the West German government shared the skeptical analysis of the Soviet system, it was not as skeptical as France or the United States. The Germans took their optimism from the fact that they deemed their system and societies to be superior to the Soviet system and assessed

⁸⁵⁹ BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: West-Ost Beziehungen“, 7.10.1982.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁶¹ BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: Deutsch-Französische Bestandaufnahme der West-Ost Beziehungen“, 18.10.1982.

⁸⁶² Ibid.

⁸⁶³ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid.

that the Soviets had no good answers to the challenges of a modern or maturing industrial society: “it does not master its economic problems, it is not able to handle social changes, and it gives no answer to the growing requests for more freedom by its individuals. Its answers with internal repression and external force remains sterile in the long run.”⁸⁶⁶ Summed up in one sentence, the memorandum thus emphasized that Kohl should highlight to Mitterrand that the key “the requirement success towards the East is Western unity and sober realism.”⁸⁶⁷

“The utmost degree of continuity”? Preliminary conclusions

Analyzing the Kohl-Genscher’s government’s first interactions with its major allies and antagonist, two conflicting impressions stand out. On one hand, the new coalition indeed made it a priority to stress the continuity in foreign affairs towards its most important allies and rival. The reasons therefore are many.

In an international arena dominated by the thawing of U.S.-Soviet relations, a new general secretary in the Soviet Union, a still relatively new U.S. administration, an international economic crisis, and domestic financial worries in Germany, being a reliable and predictable actor was perceived as being paramount. As Hans-Dietrich Genscher stressed in his first meeting with GDR-foreign minister Fischer after the change of government, a country with Germany’s geographic location and history had to pursue a calculable and reliable policy per definition.⁸⁶⁸ Germany’s geographic position as a Cold War frontline state and the ongoing issue of German unification mandated a foreign policy that was firmly rooted in the Western alliance but also tried to advance antagonistic cooperation with the East. Both for ideological and security reasons, maintaining good working relations with the East, and especially Moscow, where paramount for economic, security and humanitarian reasons.

Amidst the foreign policy continuity in the West German government, domestic changes were underway, though. Societal changes, material insecurities and the rise of the peace movement set its mark on the security policy debates in the Federal Republic. As Konrad Seitz from

⁸⁶⁶ BArch, B136-16579, „Betr.: West-Ost Beziehungen“, 7.10.1982. For a good analysis on the magnitude of these challenges see Bartel, *The Triumph of Broken Promises*.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ AADP 1982, 1348-1351.

the foreign office had noted in November 1982 after having participated in a work shop of the evangelical churches on the implementation of the dual track decision: “the arguments the Federal government uses for defending its security and arms control policies are ineffective in these circles since the peace movement is operating with completely different basic assumptions, or rather basic feelings.”⁸⁶⁹ Among these assumptions, Seitz noted, was the idea that the Soviet Union was no threat for Western Europe, that the danger for Western Europe laid in the rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union – or rather the rivalry of the USA against the Soviet Union - and that there was no community of values (*Wertegemeinschaft*) with the USA. Among the proponents of these assumptions were prominent social democrats like Erhard Eppler and the journalist Peter Bender. In fact, it was exactly these kinds of fundamental disagreements, which had doomed Helmut Schmidt. Seitz concluded his observations with the assessment that “it is hopeless to convince the core of the peace movement of the rightfulness of NATO’s dual track decision”. The fear and arguments of the peace movement were starting to influence the “silent majority”, however. The federal government would have to increase its efforts to win over the silent majority and explain the necessity of the dual track decision. Part of the public outreach undertaking would entail to convince the sceptics that the Soviet threat on Western Europe indeed was real, not in terms of a military intervention or warfare but rather in terms of political and psychological intimidation. As Seitz put it pointedly: “security in the real world means for Western Europe in particular: security from Soviet blackmailing.”⁸⁷⁰

International events were certainly not on Helmut Kohl’s side as the chancellor entered his first full term in March 1983 after a decisive victory in an election that had been widely viewed as a *Raketenwahl*, a referendum on the dual track decision. While the CDU/CSU achieved its best electoral result in decades, the SPD was severely decimated and received the lowest level of support since the early 1960s. At the same time, the left splintered, with the Greens achieving the historic feat of crossing the 5 percent threshold, thus becoming the fourth party in the *Bundestag*, securing a remarkable twenty-eight seats.⁸⁷¹ Two days after Kohl and his government had won decisive reelection, Ronald Reagan labelled the Soviet Union “an evil empire”, a fatal blow to the German

⁸⁶⁹ PA AA, Band 178514, Konrad Seitz, „Betr.: Arbeitstagung des Evangelischen Kirchentages zum Thema „Friedensethische und friedenspolitische Optionen“, Bonn, November 29, 1982.

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁷¹ Colbourn, 179.

hopes of U.S-Soviet rapprochement.⁸⁷² Fifteen days later, Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which further alarmed Soviet leaders.

In the Federal Republic, the final decision on the key West German foreign policy question for 1983 was coming up, while the German peace movement grew in strength and the SPD continued its leftwards drift: whether to put *Westbindung* first and show alliance solidarity and, if necessary, station American missiles on German soil.

⁸⁷² In a fascinating account, the historian Simon Miles contradicts the view of Reagan as an aggressive Cold Warrior, who brought the world to the brink of nuclear Armageddon in the early 1980s and lays out the extensive negotiations between Washington and Moscow, which contributed to nuclear disarmament and, ultimately, the end of the Cold War. Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

Conclusion: The Triumph of Continuity

“The statesman resembles the hiker in the forest who knows the direction of his walk but not the spot where he will step out of the forest. Just as the hiker the statesman has to adhere to the walkable paths, if he does not want to get lost.”

- Otto von Bismarck⁸⁷³

In 1969 Egon Bahr had written down an important guideline for the conduct of *Ostpolitik*: “The United States will remain our most important partner, eventually our security is based upon our relationship with them.”⁸⁷⁴ During Helmut Schmidt’s chancellorship, Bahr and the left wing of the SPD moved away from this previous assessment.

In the best outcome, Willy Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* was complementary to Konrad Adenauer’s *Westbindung*. Finding the right balance between these two cornerstones of West German foreign policy was a delicate balancing act throughout the Cold War. Whereas the balancing act was managed with remarkable outcomes during Brandt’s chancellorship and initially also under Schmidt, the international climate changed significantly during the late 1970s and thus also necessitated rethinking the balance between *Westbindung* and *Ostpolitik*.

Helmut Kohl’s entrance has generally been regarded as non-formative event in West German Cold War history, especially when compared to Adenauer’s chancellorship and *Westbindung* and Brandt’s 1969 victory and the subsequent *Neue Ostpolitik*. Both events have typically been described as the Federal Republic’s two transformative phases throughout the Cold War. In the dominant interpretation, the change from Schmidt to Kohl was hardly noticeable and is typically described by one word: continuity. But as with most other sweeping generalizations this dominant interpretation raises questions. For example:

Why would Hans Dietrich-Genscher and the FDP have felt compelled to switch horses from Kohl to Schmidt in the fall of 1982 if that change, as the historiography claims, subsequently would be characterized by historians as ‘classic continuity’?

⁸⁷³ Quoted in Johannes Kunisch (eds.) *Bismarck Und Seine Zeit* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1992), 36.

⁸⁷⁴ Quoted in Niedhart, *Strained Alliance*, 39, footnote 67.

The FDP's electoral considerations at the time, or rather concerns, and domestic policy differences with the SPD of course played a significant role for the breakup of the Social-Liberal coalition. It also has to be stressed that the change of guards was not a clear cut decision. In fact, the FDP was almost evenly split whether the change was advisable.

However, in my view, security policy also came to play a crucial role. At the end of the long 1970s (1969-1982), the majority of the SPD had moved away from the guiding principles in West German Cold War foreign policy. The principle of a strong *Westbindung* and the necessity for strong transatlantic relations as a prerequisite for dealing with the East had been summarized skillfully by Willy Brandt in 1970 as "our Ostpolitik is based on our Westpolitik".⁸⁷⁵ Ten years later, the party of Willy Brandt - who in the early 1970s had stressed that the Federal Republic "would not conduct its Ostpolitik as a wanderer between the worlds, but in the firm anchoring of western cooperation" - was increasingly willing to go it alone and without the approval of its security guarantor, the United States.⁸⁷⁶ Indeed, the SPD's "second *Ostpolitik*" of the 1980s became, in the retro perspective words of one of its main social democratic proponents, "a somewhat Germanocentric undertaking".⁸⁷⁷

The *Neue Ostpolitik* was a sensible policy in its initial years, but the SPD failed to adapt it to thoughtful to changing international circumstances, just like the Christian Democrats had failed to account adequately for domestic and international developments of the late 1960s and early 1970s regarding détente and *Ostpolitik*. What the SPD wanted to pursue from the late 1970s and onwards was fundamentally at odds with the ideas sketched out in NATO's Harmel Report – deterrence as the prerequisite for détente - which remained the considerate guiding principles for West German foreign policy. Thereby, the SPD's left wing opened the door to the Chancellery for Helmut Kohl and the Christian Democrats.

After Helmut Schmidt's exit in the fall of 1982, *Der Spiegel* argued that "little endured of historical value."⁸⁷⁸ Recent historical studies have articulated a more nuanced view of Schmidt's chancellorship.⁸⁷⁹ Similarly, this thesis argues that revisionism is in due course when it comes to

⁸⁷⁵ Brandt in Fischer, 18.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁷ Ehmke in Fischer, 23.

⁸⁷⁸ „Dreizehn Jahre geliehene Macht“ (Der Spiegel 39/1982): <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-14353616.html> (accessed 25.6.2023).

⁸⁷⁹ Spohr, *Global Chancellor*, Kieninger, *Diplomacy of Détente* and Mathias Haeussler, *Helmut Schmidt and British-German Relations: A European Misunderstanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Schmidt's *Ostpolitik*. While it never reached the political heights of Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik*, Schmidt's *Ostpolitik* proved adept for the challenges at the time.

Schmidt liked to claim after his fall that it was "the achievement of the Kohl government to have continued his policies without major disruption".⁸⁸⁰ In fact, the disruptors turned out to be Schmidt's Social Democratic Party fellows and the 'continuity' was rather a return to the guiding principles of West German Cold War foreign policy.

In this interpretation, West Germany's Cold War history contains three transformative phases. During the Cold War of the early 1950s, the major questions for West German foreign policy focused on the terms and the timing of closer Western integration. The circumstances of West Germany's founding - a fusion of the French, British and American occupation zones - had left the Federal Republic with no realistic alternative to Western integration and made good relations to the French, British and American governments paramount. At the same time, however, relations with the Soviet Union were crucial as well. The emergence of détente during the late 1960s and 1970s addressed these shortfalls and answered the question of how to combine *Westbindung* with closer ties to the East. This was the beginning of the era of *Ostpolitik*, which aimed to combine "integration and sovereignty" (Klaus Hildebrand) with "Westbindung plus Eastern connections" (Werner Link) in order to achieve reconciliation with the Eastern Bloc and make the division of Germany and Europe more bearable.⁸⁸¹ Finally, in the late 1970s and 1980s, the deterioration of U.S.-Soviet détente, the decline of European détente and *Ostpolitik*, the controversy over the dual track decision and a – politically and economically - more powerful West Germany forced West German leaders to reconsider yet again how to strike the right balance between *Westbindung* and *Ostpolitik*.

Ostpolitik was a policy full of contradictions. It likely both facilitated some change through rapprochement - *Wandel durch Annäherung* – meaning better relations with governments in the Eastern Bloc and some perforation of the Iron Curtain, while at the same time also – unwillingly – contributing to the temporary stabilization of the regimes in the Eastern Bloc and being dismissive of dissidents and change from below. For Alois Mertes, the foreign policy expert in the CDU who Kohl appointed as state secretary in the foreign ministry from 1982 until Mertes' death in 1985, "change through rapprochement" was a fiction. For Hans-Dietrich Genscher, his boss in the foreign

⁸⁸⁰ Hofmann, "Total Unfähig".

⁸⁸¹ Klaus Hildebrand, *Integration Und Souveränität: Die Aussenpolitik Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949-1982* (Bouvier, 1991); Werner Link in Peter März (eds.), *40 Jahre Zweistaatlichkeit in Deutschland Eine Bilanz* (Bayerische Landeszentrale Für Politische Bildungsarbeit, 1999).

ministry, the initial stabilization of the Eastern regimes, combined with increased East-West trade, had led to a gradual relaxation of the systems.⁸⁸² In the end, both Mertes and Genscher probably were right to some degree. Whether a different course would have produced better results, is of course impossible to say.

Ostpolitik had become a national policy by the mid- to late-1970s, once the Christian Democrats finally had accepted the premise of the Eastern Treaties as the foundation for West German foreign policy. While there still were strands within the CDU, and especially within the CSU, that voiced their criticism and demanded an ostpolitikal turnaround, these strands only constituted a vocal but ultimately powerless minority, as the 1980 election underlined. Both Kohl and Genscher thus made it clear early on in the fall of 1982 that continuity in foreign policy was key to forming a new government. Indeed, the Christian Democrats had moved considerably, as Genscher had noted in meetings with Soviet and GDR leaders. The old Christian Democrats from the mid-1960s were no more. Since then, a significant “rapprochement” had taken place, Genscher observed.⁸⁸³ *Ostpolitik* had become unanimously accepted by all parties represented in the German *Bundestag*, Genscher stressed to Gromyko in October 1982. “The utmost degree of continuity and reliability could be expected,” the West German foreign minister told the Soviet foreign minister.⁸⁸⁴ As the FDP-chairman noted, this had not always been the case, but a broad consensus had emerged. A change of government would thus not make a difference.⁸⁸⁵ This was in itself quite remarkable, Genscher argued.⁸⁸⁶

While Genscher exaggerated the degree of ostpolitikal agreement within the West German political system – there were significant disagreements that had contributed decisively to the fall of Helmut Schmidt and the CSU remained skeptical, to say the least - it is true that the domestic fight against *Ostpolitik* was not as outspoken anymore as it had been during the Brandt-Scheel government. From Schmidt and onwards, the debate would center around the question on how to conduct *Ostpolitik* under less favorable circumstances than Brandt had encountered.

Finally, it is worth considering the counterfactual. As the historian Eckart Conze has asked: would an alternative *Ostpolitik* with a more confrontational course towards the Soviets and the GDR have been realistic in the fall of 1982? Could the Kohl-Genscher government have pursued

⁸⁸² Bark and Gress (eds.), 409.

⁸⁸³ AADP 1982, Ministerialdirektor Pfeffer, z. Z. New York, an das Auswärtige Amt, 5. Oktober 1982, 1348.

⁸⁸⁴ Genscher, *Erinnerungen*, 477.

⁸⁸⁵ AADP 1982, Ministerialdirektor Pfeffer, z. Z. New York, an das Auswärtige Amt, 6. Oktober 1982, 1368.

⁸⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

German unification more offensively and globally? According to Conze, the answer is no: there was no real alternative – and especially none who had the backing of the German people.⁸⁸⁷ Rather, the grand bargain had already been made throughout the mid-1970s and onwards when Kohl succeeded in forging a significant foreign policy consensus with the FDP.⁸⁸⁸ An alternative *Ostpolitik* was thus never a serious topic of discussion among the Christian-Liberal government. And while Kohl tried to present himself as the tougher guy in his dealings with the East – and went on to have some success with using the FRG's economic and political leverage with the GDR, Poland, Hungary and eventually even the Soviet Union - the new chancellor acted in the name of continuity through change.

There is a second counterfactual, however. Maybe, the interesting counterfactual is not about a hypothetically 'tougher' *Ostpolitik*. Rather, it is what might have happened if Brandt, Bahr and the SPD-left had gotten its will. After all, the Schmidt-Genscher government did not fall apart because it was pursuing a 'tough' *Ostpolitik* but because the SPD's leftwing, spurred on by peace and ecological movements, wanted to pursue a 'softer' *Ostpolitik*. The question is, therefore, what might have happened in a scenario where the pendulum of political priorities had swung towards more *Ostpolitik* and less *Westbindung*?

Obviously, we will never know. But contrary to Conze's counterfactual, we know what happened before the pendulum swung: Helmut Schmidt was toppled because he, in addition to domestic disagreements, could no longer convince Hans-Dietrich Genscher that the leftwards drifting SPD was a responsible and reliable government partner.⁸⁸⁹ The most important shift therefore came in the new government's commitment to the Federal Republic's *Westbindung* and consequently also to its commitment to a realistic policy of détente.

It was Hans-Dietrich Genscher – the harbinger of stability in the era of *Ostpolitik* - who explained the continuity in the Federal Republic's *Ostpolitik* most convincingly in a meeting with the general secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party János Kádár on November 26, 1982.⁸⁹⁰ Addressing Kádár's satisfaction with the articulated continuity in Helmut Kohl's governmental declaration and in the first foreign meetings, Genscher observed the following: while the old Social-Liberal coalition had collapsed over economic concerns, he would not have been part

⁸⁸⁷ Conze, 619-62.

⁸⁸⁸ Banchoff, 123.

⁸⁸⁹ See for example Genscher's reply to a letter from Prof. Dr. G. Hartmann on November 30th, 1982 in Archiv des Liberalismus, Bestand Genscher, Signatur N52-248, 61.

⁸⁹⁰ AADP 1982, Vortragender Legationsrat I. Klasse Edler von Braunmühl, z. Z. Budapest, an das Auswärtige Amt 27. November 1982, 1666-1673.

of a new government if he had been in doubt whether the foreign policy course would be continued. In Genscher's view, the Federal Republic of Germany could not afford a zigzag course. The continuation of the foreign and security policy was the commercial basis (*Geschäftsgrundlage*) for the formation of a new government.⁸⁹¹ As for the Christian Democrats, Genscher continued, the party had evolved in its position over the last years. The party was now willing to conduct *Ostpolitik* on the basis of the existing treaties, which had to be honored – a given for Genscher – and also agreed that the treaties had to be filled with life and used actively to foster positive developments. When forming the new government, foreign policy had thus been the political subject talked the least about; about East-West relations the parties had not spoken at all, according to Genscher. *Ostpolitik* had become a national policy supported by all major political parties, guaranteeing stability and predictability, the foreign minister claimed.⁸⁹²

As we have seen, there were indeed hardly any indications that could have justified such a turnaround in foreign affairs in times of domestic and global uncertainty. Unlike earlier developments in the United States and Great Britain with the elections of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, there was no 'conservative revolution' in West Germany despite a political shift to the right. There was, however, a return to (renewed) continuity with the CDU/CSU-FDP alignment. This shift, however, had less with the personal change in the Chancellery from one Helmut to another to do and more with the party political composition. It was paramount to oust the increasingly leftist SPD and facilitate the return of the more moderate center-right CDU, where the most hardline and right wing voices had become marginalized in the aftermath of Franz Josef Strauß's decisive electoral loss 1980.

The irony of the propagated turn ("*Wende*") in the fall of 1982 is thus that the turn actually was a return. In other words, change facilitated continuity. Hans-Dietrich Genscher and his FDP changed horses in midstream because they wanted to prevent a turn in West German foreign and security policy. The result was a turn away from anti-Americanism and relativism from an increasingly raucous SPD base that threatened to derail the implementation of NATO's dual track decision, which was undermining West Germany's status as a reliable and steadfast political actor, and the return of the Christian Democrats to power in order to continue *détente* unenthusiastically.

⁸⁹¹ AADP 1982, Vortragender Legationsrat I. Klasse Edler von Braunmühl, z. Z. Budapest, an das Auswärtige Amt 27. November 1982, 1668.

⁸⁹² *Ibid*, 1667.

If we want to talk about a(nother) potential turning point in the era of *Ostpolitik*, it is thus apt to characterize the 1983 election as a decisive turning point. It was the CDU/CSU's resounding victory at the polls in March 1983 - the so-called *Raketenwahl* - and the SPD's simultaneous significant losses that legitimized the government's decision to stay the course of continuity through change. A clear majority of the West German population had rejected the course the Social Democrats were advocating for and decided to give the Christian-Liberal government a clear mandate to address the key foreign policy question of 1983: whether to put *Westbindung* first and show alliance solidarity and, if necessary, station American missiles on German soil.

In 1965, Willy Brandt had channeled Otto von Bismarck's observation about the hiker in the forest: "In politics you cannot set a long-term plan and act blindly in this sense. One can only sketch the direction to be followed out on a large scale; and then, of course, keep an eye on it."⁸⁹³

The genius of Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* was that it had set out a long-term plan that allowed every West German chancellor after Brandt to keep an eye on unification without having to commit himself to acting blindfolded and in naïve allegiance to it. As the nature of the Cold War changed, the meanings and conceptions of *Ostpolitik* changed as well, adjusted to the means of a more powerful Federal Republic.

In the end, it spoke to Helmut Kohl's political craftsmanship that he succeeded in steering the Christian Democrats towards a more pragmatic and constructive engagement with Brandt's and Schmidt's *Ostpolitik*. The story of the era of *Ostpolitik* is thus also a story of two different paths, resembling two hikers in a forest. While the Christian Democrats moderated their initial opposition to Brandt's signature policy and learned to continue *détente* unenthusiastically – thereby returning to the path and to power - the Social Democrats became more dogmatic about *détente* and lost both their eye of the path and the keys to the Chancellery.

Ultimately, though, it was the FDP who adhered to the walkable paths of the Cold War for the longest time, becoming the guardian of *Westbindung* and *Ostpolitik* and ensuring the triumph of continuity.

⁸⁹³ Quoted in Faulenbach, *Brandt*, 61.

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