

## Willy Brandt and Ostpolitik

### *The International Setting*

In the immediate post-war period, many in the West believed (correctly) that the Soviet empire was inherently unstable and expected (incorrectly) that Western technological superiority would quickly triumph over the Communist East. This view was shaken as the Soviet Union apparently caught up with and began to challenge the West in areas such as space.

Emerging superpower status allowed Moscow to tighten control over its satellite states. Willy Brandt cites his first hand observation of the 1961 building of the Berlin Wall as the act which ended his illusions over U.S. willingness to challenge unilateral Soviet acts in Moscow-dominated territory.<sup>1</sup>

By the late 1960s, the stage was set for detente (which required perceived near equality to be operational). For detente to succeed, the West would have to accept an ideologically divided Europe for the foreseeable future.

For the German nation, this meant a divided country, locked in separate spheres of influence and in two military alliances. In practical terms, it also made Germany the most likely future European battlefield, as NATO and Warsaw Pact troops faced each other across the inner German frontier.

### *The Domestic Setting*

As Chancellor (1955–1963), Konrad Adenauer had set West Germany on a high road to reunification. Adenauer saw both the

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<sup>1</sup> Willy Brandt, *People and Politics, : The Years 1960–1975*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1976) pg. 20.

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United States and the Soviet Union as key to German reunification but believed that growing Western superiority would eventually lead to negotiations favoring settlement on Western terms.<sup>2</sup>

For Adenauer, German reunification would take place within a broader resolution of East-West relations in Europe. His government refused to recognize the Oder-Neisse Line as the permanent border between Poland and Germany, arguing that no permanent changes in German borders could take place prior to the negotiation of a final all-German peace treaty.<sup>3</sup> "The "Hallstein Doctrine," a key element of his strategy, required the Federal German Republic to break diplomatic relations with all countries that recognized East Germany and not to enter into diplomatic relations with any Communist country except the USSR.

Adenauer's objective was clear: a united Germany firmly tied to the West. He was right to predict that Soviet decline would be a precondition for German reunification. Under such circumstances, his strategy might have worked; however, his timing was wrong. He left Germany with an entrenched legal position that was increasingly difficult to maintain and that isolated Germany from its traditional Central European power base and the Third World.

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<sup>2</sup>Wolfram F. Hanrieder and Graeme P. Auton, *The Foreign Policies of West Germany, France and Britain*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1980) pp. 53-55.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, p. 52.

Willy Brandt helped Bonn climb down from Adenauer's high road. He may have also intended to turn the path, if necessary, slightly to the East.

### *Willy Brandt's Germany*

Willy Brandt was the first German Socialist Chancellor since the Weimar Republic. His election represented continuity with Germany's pre-war past and underlined a return to normal. West Germany's economy had been rebuilt: economic growth was running at 7-8%, inflation was 1.5% and unemployment levels were low enough to draw a growing flow of "guest workers."<sup>4</sup> The federal budget had a surplus of 1.5 billion Deutsche Marks.<sup>5</sup> The Mark was becoming the pivotal currency in the European Community.

However, democratic stability, a flourishing economy and growing economic clout were not sufficient at that time to restore German prestige fully or to give Germany the power to regain the lost Eastern l nder. German political action continued to be constrained by both its adversaries and its allies.

It would be impossible for Brandt not to know the doggerel purpose of NATO: to keep the Russians down and the Germans in. Any solution to German reunification that threatened West Germany's Western and NATO ties would not be acceptable to the United States. The Soviets would be equally unwilling to lose East Germany's contribution to the Warsaw Pact.

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<sup>4</sup>Dennis L. Bark and David R. Gress, *Democracy and its Discontents: 1963-1988*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc.) pp.86-87.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, p. 87.

Brandt was also constrained by domestic politics. The "Hallstein Doctrine" had begun to erode in 1965, when Bonn declared that East European Communist regimes were born with diplomatic relations to East Germany and did not have the power to choose; this interpretation had permitted West Germany to establish relations with Romania in 1967.<sup>6</sup> The Grand Coalition government (with Brandt as Foreign Minister) had opened the door further.

However, Adenauer's policy of strength had left its mark. Even within the Coalition, most supported limited efforts to improve the life of East Germans and pave the way for eventual reunification; only the Socialists saw recognizing East Germany as a necessary precondition for other improvements.<sup>7</sup> This won the Socialists the title, "party of recognition," coined by Kiesinger, an erst-while ally.<sup>8</sup> Others trusted the Socialists even less.

### ***Brandt's Objectives***

Willy Brandt came to power determined to "preserve the national unity by deconstricting the relationship between the two parts of Germany."<sup>9</sup> He saw past policies as threatening to push the two Germanies further apart until the split became irrevocable. **A realist, Brandt lowered his sights from traditional reunification to a less formal framework of treaties and agreements** that would

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90.

<sup>9</sup> Brandt, *op. cit.*, pg. 367

permit greater inner German contact and cooperation. Expanded inner German ties would help preserve the "cultural nation" and could provide a basis for some future undefined form of coexistence, in the context of a broader European peace settlement.

By framing the objective in terms less rigid than state nationhood, Brandt sidestepped the issue of the future political allegiance of the German people. However, concern over Nato/Warsaw pact commitments remained below the surface. Henry Kissinger warned President Nixon that while he believed Brandt did not intend to undermine Germany's Western orientation, a successful Ostpolitik could create momentum to shift Germany's international position.<sup>10</sup>

Kissinger was not alone in remembering that Germany's traditional foreign policy had been to maneuver freely between East and West. Critics charged that Socialist Party strategist Wehner hoped for some form of Socialist reunification that would transform both Germanies, presumably leaving them in neither the Communist or Western camp.<sup>11</sup> Speaking "hypothetically," key Brandt adviser Egon Bahr described a design for Europe that would result in the creation of a collective security system in Central Europe, guaranteed by both the U.S. and the USSR and accompanied by the dissolution of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact.<sup>12</sup> While Brandt's course was not inconsistent with these outcomes, Western leaders

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<sup>10</sup>Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979) pg. 408-9.

<sup>11</sup>Bark and Gress, *op.cit.* pg.96

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* pg, 163.

discounted the dark side of Ostpolitik to pursue a positive course.

In launching Ostpolitik, Brandt had a second objective: to **normalize relations with the rest of the "East."** In 1969, in Eastern Europe, West Germany had diplomatic relations only with Romania and Yugoslavia. Overtures had been made by the Grand Coalition, but the FRG was still not represented in many Central European capitals where German influence had once been paramount.

Brandt's strategy had to address: Allied concern over continued West German allegiance to the West; Soviet concern over weakened East German links to the East; East German hostility to West Germany and fear that Bonn would not treat the East German government as an equal; and German domestic concerns that Brandt would sell out a long-term commitment to a reunited, Western-oriented Germany for short-term gains. And the outcome had to guarantee the future security of West Berlin.

**Brandt did not have a strong hand.** Germany's growing postwar economic power and concomitant political strength could, for historical reasons, be used only deferentially. Germany remained dependent militarily on the Allies, particularly for protection of West Berlin. However, while U.S. support was necessary for Brandt to succeed, **Soviet goodwill was also critical to his plan.**

The greatest weakness was unstated. While many were committed to German unification, only the Germans wanted rapid success. Others were comfortable to leave one Germany as a long-term goal. Kissinger, who thought Ostpolitik would be more likely to lead to the permanent division of Germany, saw no reason to oppose it on

those grounds – although German unification remained a U.S. goal.

***Brandt's Strategy: Balancing Other People's Power***

Brandt recognized that West Germany would have to promote its own interests to make Ostpolitik succeed. The muted Western reaction to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia reinforced his view that the West would continue to accept the status quo in Europe. He also saw that the Czech invasion had little effect on efforts to improve East-West relations.

The importance that the West placed on the success of detente was both a threat and an opening. The sweep of East-West rapprochement could easily push aside issues of the status of Berlin and the larger "German question." Brandt had to ensure that normalization of inner German relations was woven into the fabric of detente, rather than left to become a sideshow.

Adenauer had tied German reunification to resolution of global European peace issues. Brandt continued to see a divided Germany as a consequence and not a cause of the division of Europe; but he argued that steps to regularize relations between the parts of Germany could precede a European peace settlement. An interim inner German *modus vivendi* would contribute to reducing East-West tensions. The alternative, in Brandt's view, could leave Germany as "whipping boy" and "last Cold Warrior" in a post-detente world.

To reach out to the East and position Germany to reclaim its central place in the European power structure, Brandt relied on



personal diplomacy, linkages, balance of power politics, and — where he had them to offer — incentives.

Domestically, Brandt began quickly to restructure the legal framework of Germany's post-war policy. After taking office in October, 1969 he changed the name of the ministry for divided Germany from "All-German Affairs" to "Inner German Affairs," de facto abandonment of Bonn's claim to be the sole representative of all the German people.<sup>13</sup> This would permit Brandt to deal with the East German government as a legitimate diplomatic partner.

Even before Brandt took office, Egon Bahr was in Washington, to argue for Ostpolitik. If Kissinger decided that Germany's policy could fit into a Kissingerian view of the world (or threaten that view, if uncontrolled), Brandt would gain a powerful ally.

While Kissinger saw dangers in Brandt's approach, he also saw the opportunity to advance his own detente objectives, provided that German efforts were part of the drive to achieve broader Western aims. Kissinger was concerned over a tendency emerging among Western European leaders to distance themselves from U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union, and he feared the Soviets might exploit Western European desires to play the role of "bridge" between East and West to divide the U.S. from its allies.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Bark and Gress, *op.cit.*, page 164.

<sup>14</sup>Kissinger, *op.cit.*, pg. 132.

Typically, Kissinger looked to linkage to keep the Germans on board and block Soviet efforts to carry out "selective detente."<sup>15</sup>

Brandt also sought Soviet cooperation very early, proposing to negotiate an agreement on mutual renunciation of force. By showing that he did not intend to end run the USSR in extending Ostpolitik to Central and Eastern Europe and eventually East Germany, Brandt hoped to avoid the earlier Soviet antagonism that had soured efforts of the Grand Coalition.

Brandt used Bahr to keep lines open to Kissinger and to the Soviets throughout Ostpolitik negotiations. By consulting with both superpowers and keeping each informed, Brandt sought to avoid actions that might stir latent fears in Washington or Moscow.

When Brandt did approach the GDR, he offered to negotiate with East Germany as an equal, although not as a foreign country. (Brandt's formula angered both the East Germans and his domestic opposition but not enough to derail the negotiations.) Brandt launched the talks with Willi Stoph personally, carrying an olive branch to a hostile East German government (though not to Berlin).

Even with possible Soviet prodding, the initial talks did not go well. Both Brandt and Stoph held firmly to positions that reflected the concerns of their respective alliances. Despite this, Brandt did apparently develop some kind of understanding, though not friendship, with Stoph, meeting with him one-on-one four times during their negotiations. While there is no record of these

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<sup>15</sup>Kissinger, *op.cit.* pg. 410.

conversations, both Brandt and Stoph must have considered them useful to continue the practice throughout the difficult talks.

This initial experimental dialogue ended in deadlock. However, it broke the ice for lower level talks later in the year. Faced with an impasse on the central issue, Bonn began methodically to solve practical problems, starting with inner German traffic.

Meanwhile, the linkages Kissinger wanted were building. Talks among the Four Powers were underway in Berlin, spurred by President Nixon. A Four Power Berlin agreement would remove a high profile flash point in East-West relations. NATO Foreign Ministers had made agreement on a European Security Conference, which the Soviets wanted, conditional on progress on talks on Berlin and on Soviet-German negotiations. Conclusion of a Bonn-Moscow Treaty was necessary to help move the Berlin talks along; but, despite Brandt's warnings, the German Parliament had made a satisfactory Quadripartite agreement safeguarding Berlin a precondition to putting the Bonn-Berlin Treaty into effect. The Soviets had countered by linking the Berlin agreement to ratification of the Moscow Treaty. Linkages were becoming a virtual spider's web.

Brandt saw a successful conclusion of the Berlin negotiations as central to a global improvement in inner German relations. With so much riding on the outcome, he remained in close contact with the Berlin negotiators. At one point, he wrote personally to Brezhnev to resolve a question of travel by West Berliners on FRG passports, a key concern for West Berlin voters.

Brandt knew the East had strong economic reasons to improve relations with West Germany. Closer cooperation with West Germany could provide economic benefits, including access to needed Western technology, for the Soviet Union and its satellite states. The stakes were especially high for East Germany, which gained limited access to EC markets through inner German trade. In his talks with Brandt, Stoph often raised commercial matters, and Brandt was quick to highlight the practical benefits of closer inner German ties.

### *Romancing the East*

In the end, Brandt's strategy was effective, if involved. Every player came away believing enough had been gained for concessions given to justify support for the final package. By 1973, the main Ostpolitik objectives had been achieved.

Despite efforts to avoid a "political straitjacket," Brandt found that to maintain confidence and meet the conflicting interests of East, West and domestic participants, the components of his final treaty framework had to interlock tightly. The collapse of any part could bring down the whole. Given the stakes — control of middle Europe — trust was not a part of the package.

The linkages that brought about ratification of the final treaties looked like a Rube Goldberg machine. In the end, the network of treaties and agreements that defined the status of inner German relations and advanced the Federal Republic's relations with the East included: the Bonn-Moscow Treaty (signed 1970); the Bonn-Warsaw Treaty (signed 1970); the Bonn-Prague Treaty (signed 1973); the Bonn-Budapest and Bonn-Sofia Treaties (concluded 1973); the

Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin (effective, 1972); the Inner German follow-on Quadripartite agreements (1972); the Inner German Traffic Accord (signed 1972); and the Treaty on the Basis of Relations between the Federal Republic and the GDR (signed 1972).<sup>16</sup>

On October 3, 1990, as Adenauer and Kissinger had predicted, the collapse of the Soviet Union permitted German unification. Because of the changes that Brandt brought about in inner German relations, the road ahead, though rocky, was at least open.

Brandt was too much of a realist to have set a united, Western-oriented Germany before the year 2000 as his goal. He may have been willing to settle for, e.g., a socialist, neutral Germany with Central European ties in an undefined future (an outcome still possible). However, overachievement is not failure.

Could Ostpolitik have been implemented more efficiently? Probably not. In the John Le Carre world of 1960s Europe, international contacts took place in an atmosphere of relative distrust. Further, Brandt could not call upon personal or national stature to impose his will. He substituted his legal framework of agreed procedures and commitments for the mutual confidence that he hoped would eventually emerge from reduced East-West tensions.

A cartoon popular at the time of German unification shows West Germany in a nuptial bed with East Germany. The caption reads "Our friends all think that we should have a long courtship." They did, thanks to Willy Brandt.

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<sup>16</sup>Bark and Gress, *op.cit.*, pg. 171

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