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Willy Brandt and Ostpolitik

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Summary: West German Chancellor Willie Brandt was a leader of vision and perseverance whose skills at statecraft engaged--and began to alter--the fundamental power alignments in postwar Central Europe. His policy of Ostpolitik (the FRG's opening to the East) had its origins in the deep recesses of German history and psyche. Ostpolitik's immediate objective was to ameliorate the hardships caused by the division of Germany and Berlin; Ostpolitik's long term goal was to carve out maneuver room for FRG diplomacy in Central Europe. Brandt's approach to statecraft was formed in the wake of the Berlin Wall crisis and evolved through a process of trial and error in his various incarnations as mayor of West Berlin, Foreign Minister and Chancellor.

Success eluded Brandt until he properly understood the fundamental interest/power relationships among the key state actors and based his diplomatic initiatives on a firm foundation in the Western Alliance. Brandt realized his immediate objective only after Ostpolitik was married to Kissinger's more subtle, expansive and powerful detente statecraft. Ostpolitik's limited initial objective was achieved by balancing asymmetrical power and interests, and by creating complex linkages among key states' competing objectives. Brandt's lasting legacy was to propel FRG statecraft onto center stage in the European power balance and begin the long, continuing process of reconciliation, renewal and peaceful change in Central Europe.

Background: One cannot begin to appreciate either the rationale for or modus operandi of Brandt's Ostpolitik without first understanding the contemporary historical context of the German question. History weighs heavily on the German soul, and no where more so than in Berlin. Bismark's brilliant creation, the German nation state--that Central European col~~o~~ssus which by the turn of the century had become the fulcrum of the European power balance--was shattered by World War II. Unconditionally defeated, Germany's fate was sealed at Yalta and Potsdam when the victorious powers agreed temporarily to divide Germany into four administrative zones of occupation: U.S., British, French and Soviet. Berlin was similarly divided for temporary post-war administration.

Dividing Germany proved easier by far than agreeing on its ultimate status. Stalin's expansive designs for a Central European security glacis for the Soviet Union coupled with his use of communist subversion to obtain his post-war foreign policy goals ushered in the Cold War. The inner-German and inner-Berlin demarcation lines separating the Soviet zones of occupation from the combined Western zones became frozen in time--slowly turning into de facto, although not de jure,

borders between two German entities, one democratic, free market and Western, the other a communist rump state existing uneasily in the shadow of its larger and more powerful sibling.

West Berlin (and its Western protectors) experienced a succession of major and minor crises over a decade and a half either resulting directly from Soviet attempts unilaterally to alter Berlin's status (the 1948 airlift and 1958 ultimatum) or caused by instability in East Berlin (the 1952 riot and 1961 exodus resulting in the Wall). During the 1960s as the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) gained in strength (domestic self-assurance, economic power in the EC and military power through integration of the new Bundeswehr in NATO) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) became a functioning state (the most stable and economically advanced member of the Warsaw Pact), the situation in and around Berlin gradually calmed.

Objectively, therefore, by the late 1960s sufficient stability existed along the inner-German and Berlin borders to permit diplomatic initiatives to clarify West Berlin's anomalous ~~European~~ status. The issues, however, --given Germany's geographic location and latent power potential-- cut to the heart of the post-war East-West confrontation in Europe and were infused with major symbolic and emotional significance.

Only statecraft of the highest order could achieve Brandt's goals.

Domestic Context: From its founding in 1949 until Brandt became Chancellor twenty years later, the FRG's primary foreign policy objective was clear: anchor the FRG firmly in the West. Adenauer, the FRG's first, and greatest, Chancellor (leader of the Christian Democrats -CDU) established the FRG's foreign policy priorities as : rapprochement with France (the key to establishing stability in Western Europe and eventual formation of the EC) and participation in NATO (critically important to ensure the U.S. security guarantee vis-a-vis the USSR). Questions of possible eventual German reunification and clarification of Berlin's status were secondary concerns for Adenauer, a Catholic Rhinelander, and could only be addressed in the context of a firm Western orientation for the FRG.

Indeed, Adenauer's unwaivering adherence to the fundamental objective of reorienting the center of German political gravity to the West and establishing the FRG's democratic and West European bona fides were major accomplishments of statecraft. Adenauer and his immediate successors carried out their policy in an emotionally charged domestic environment and only paid symbolic lip service to calls for reunification. Their success, albeit at the cost of a continuing harsh division of the German nation, delimited the policy options eventually

available to Brandt in pursuing his policy of normalization with the East. By the time Brandt became Chancellor, reunification of Germany (at the price of a Soviet-dictated variant of neutrality) was no longer a realistic option for consideration.

Brandt, a Social Democrat (SPD), entered government in 1966 as Foreign Minister in the CDU/SPD "Grand Coalition", before becoming Chancellor in 1969. Brandt had previously been governing major of West Berlin, including during the 1961 Wall crisis. Brandt's temperament and socialist background ~~were~~ *contrasted sharply with* ~~radically different than~~ Adenauer's conservative patrician manner.

Brandt's concept of Germany's position in Europe--and his need to articulate German interests and expand the FRG's maneuver room in what for him was an all-too-encompassing bipolar world--inevitably pushed him in the direction of Ostpolitik. The concepts behind Ostpolitik were the brainchild of Egon Bahr, Brandt's foreign policy advisor. Bahr's schooling was a curious German blend of geo-politics and 19th century German Romanticism. Germany's historic position was "Middle Europe", and Brandt/Bahr ultimately desired to re-establish as much of Germany's "Middle Europe" identity as possible within the tight parameters dictated by the Cold War

and without leaving the Western alliance.

Brandt's indignation at the FRG's less-than-sovereign status in Berlin and limited Allied support for establishing the FRG's claim to sovereignty in West Berlin is evident in his memoirs (People and Politics, Chapter 1-The Wall). In discussing the GDR's assumption of administrative control of East Berlin and the movement of GDR troops into East Berlin in August 1961 (a violation of the city's legal Four Power status), he writes: "...the mighty United States was letting itself be pushed around, in contemporary parlance by a 'satellite' of the other super power." Of his reaction to the tepid response from the U.S., Brandt notes: "Seldom, if ever, during my mayoral term had the meaning of impotent fury been more gallingly apparent to me."

It is instructive that Brandt, temperamentally a romantic "Middle Europe" German, while mayor of West Berlin did not adequately appreciate the overwhelming disparity in local power between the U.S. and USSR. Further, incredibly, Brandt ignored the clear signals of limited--but firm--U.S. interest in preserving West Berlin's status via Allied control (but only minor interest in East Berlin) during the 1948 Airlift and 1958 crisis brought on by Khrushchev's ultimatum (indeed the draft Four Power Agreement reach^{ed} at the May 11, 1959 Geneva

Ministerial Conference was explicit in allowing use of GDR personnel at checkpoints for access to West Berlin). The very measured U.S. reaction in 1961 to the building of the Wall and assumption of GDR control of East Berlin, while prudent and consistent from our perspective, shattered Brandt's illusions and reduced his perception of U.S. power and credibility. No longer would he automatically rely on Western assistance in establishing the FRG's claim to West Berlin, much less Western support for eventual reunification. Instead, Brandt determined the FRG would have to safeguard its own interests through diplomatic initiatives with the East.

International Context: Ostpolitik developed gradually through trial and error when Brandt became Foreign Minister in 1966. In an effort to ease relations with the East, the Grand Coalition offered to exchange renunciation-of-force declarations with the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia. However, the FRG's efforts to ostracize the GDR continued. (The FRG's Hallstein Doctrine threatened to sever relations with any state recognizing the GDR, a potent threat in the mid-60s for Third World states seeking FRG economic assistance, but a policy of diminishing half-life since it could not practicably be extended to Eastern Europe if Ostpolitik were to be successful.)

These early attempts at openings to the East met with limited success at best: establishment of diplomatic relations

with Bucharest in 1967, Belgrade in 1968, and trade/consular relations with Prague in 1967. Still, the breakthrough on Berlin that Brandt desired eluded him for several reasons:

- the FRG underestimated the GDR's influence on Soviet policy vis-a-vis the FRG;
- the FRG conceived its approach to the East as a "zero sum game" with the GDR, rather than devising a "win-win" strategy of negotiations seeking practical accommodations to improve West Berlin's tenuous status.
- With the exception of the carrot of economic enticements (trade) for East European countries, the FRG lacked power leverage with the Soviet Union--leverage only obtainable through concert of policy initiatives with the U.S.

Fortunately,
Brandt's Ostpolitik fit into the mosaic of Kissinger's detente grand strategy and, consequently, received the infusion of power, focused direction, and support Ostpolitik previously had lacked. Kissinger simultaneously sought to strengthen Brandt's negotiating hand with the Soviets and also imbed Ostpolitik in the larger matrix of East-West relations in order to discipline the FRG's Berlin objectives to Allied consensus (both with regard to initiatives taken and, equally important, the timing of those initiatives).

Kissinger's means of asymmetrical leverage on the Soviets regarding Berlin were both specific and general. He arranged to have the U.S., Britain and France offer their own set of proposals to Moscow on Berlin access matters which dovetailed with practical FRG objectives; and he held open the prospect of

convening a European Security Conference which Moscow proposed and hoped to use to ratify the existing borders in Eastern Europe. As an ultimate inducement to Moscow, implicit in the idea of a European Security Conference was the prospect of U.S., British and French diplomatic recognition of the GDR—a key Soviet objective.

As both the Kissinger detente strategy and Brandt's Ostpolitik gained momentum in late 1969 and 1970, and the Soviets began to engage, all parties increasingly understood that their efforts were giving recognition to the post-war status quo in Europe, preserving and codifying existing rights, lowering tension and thereby opening the prospect over time for practical improvements in inner-German relations. In short, Brandt's Ostpolitik, as focussed by Kissinger, produced a "win-win" strategy in inner-German relations while postponing tougher "theological" sovereignty and reunification issues. The FRG gained in self respect and ability to articulate and defend its own interests (key Brandt goals) and found it could only do so from a basis of concensus positions in alliance with the U.S. (key U.S. objective).

State Interests and power: Understanding the complex interplay in Central Europe of multiple state interests and the power to safeguard those interests, particularly regarding Berlin (and by implication resolution of the German question) was critical

to devising a successful strategy for Ostpolitik. Until Brandt successfully perceived the differing levels of interest and power among the various players he was unable to devise a workable strategy. State interests in 1970 regarding the Berlin anomaly may be listed as follows:

- FRG: Vital interest in obtaining greater legitimacy to FRG-West Berlin ties, improving humanitarian issues, achieving greater autonomy over inner-German affairs and over the FRG's relations with Central and Eastern Europe, and preserving options for ultimate reunification of the German nation.
- GDR: Survival interest in establishing sovereignty over East Berlin and obtaining international recognition of separate statehood; vital interest in minimizing FRG claims to West Berlin and circumscribing Allied rights in Berlin.
- USSR: Vital interest in preventing FRG ties to West Berlin, preventing German reunification within a Western framework; vital interest in establishing GDR legitimacy and obtaining recognition of East European post-war boundaries.
- U.S.: Vital interest in maintaining Allied access rights to Berlin (an issue of symbolism and credibility vis-a-vis Bonn and Moscow); vital interest in being seen to support the FRG's ties to West Berlin (a key means by which to keep the FRG firmly anchored in the West); peripheral interest in improving access conditions for residents of West Berlin, but a vital interest in seeking to establish a workable modus vivendi which would end the cycle of periodic Berlin Crises, and a vital interest in engaging the Soviet Union in seeking diplomatic solutions to other pressing problems (Vietnam, Middle East, arms control).
- Britain: Major interest in maintaining Allied access rights to Berlin (a means of asserting British interests in Central Europe).
- France: Major interest in maintaining Allied access rights to Berlin, and a vital interest in preventing German reunification (this latter interest has frequently found expression in juridical positions on Berlin status issues contrary to FRG desires--the Bonn Group frequently is an interesting case study in inter-Alliance diplomacy).

The elements of power available to each state actor to achieve primary interests were radically different. The disparity in conventional military power on the scene overwhelmingly favored the Soviet Union (as Eisenhower knew so well during the 1958 crisis). The U.S., Britain and France relied on indirect deterrent capability (nuclear and the threat of horizontal escalation); the Allies' primary tools were diplomatic--trading recognition of the GDR for improved access arrangements to West Berlin.

The GDR's power was negative (denial of access) but was offset by its critical need for recognition and legitimacy. The FRG could provide economic incentives to Eastern Europe and hold open the prospect of recognition of the post-war order in Eastern Europe, but lacked direct leverage.

Brandt miscalculated the interest/power equation in 1961 when mayor of West Berlin and also to a lesser extent when Foreign Minister in 1966. When he better appreciated these relationships, a natural strategy for Ostpolitik evolved which took advantage of the opening for creative diplomacy provided by Kissinger's detente grand strategy.

Objectives and Strategy: As Brandt's thinking adapted to the realization that politics is the art of the possible, the specific objectives for Ostpolitik crystalized into an effort: First, to improve the quality of life for West Berliners and

divided German families; second, to secure greater legal ties between the FRG and West Berlin; third, to make inner-German relations more stable and predictable; and fourth, to keep open the idea of a German "cultural" nation, if not a reunified single German state--at least for the foreseeable future. In order to achieve these objectives Brandt jettisoned the FRG's diplomatic campaign to isolate the GDR and he combined his efforts with U.S. diplomacy (a force multiplier, if you will) to enhance the prospects for success of both Ostpolitik and detente policy. The very process of Ostpolitik provided the maneuver room for FRG diplomacy which Brandt also desired.

The strategy adopted was complex and asymmetrical, and involved orchestrating diplomatic moves on several levels to the Soviet Union and the GDR; Kissinger's beloved linkages became the watchword for Ostpolitik's success. Four Power talks on Berlin opened in March 1970. In August 1970, FRG-Soviet talks began on the Moscow Treaty (bilateral relations). Simultaneously,

FRG-GDR talks opened on Berlin transit and traffic issues. The three levels of talks were linked, substantively and procedurally. Sufficient incentives in this multi-tiered negotiation existed for Moscow that when Ulbricht raised objections, Brezhnev arranged the doctrinaire GDR leader's replacement with Honecker (a special gift for Brandt--Ulbricht was responsible for the Wall; his ouster was sweet revenge for the former mayor of West Berlin). In 1971 the Quadripartite Agreement was signed, but the final implementing protocol was delayed for several months pending completion of the inner-German agreements (1971) and the FRG-Soviet bilateral treaty (1972).

Importantly, the parties' differing legal positions regarding Berlin's ultimate status were not affected by any of the agreements--the legal status quo remained. Practical accommodation was possible in inner-German relations and Berlin access, at the cost of recognizing political reality in Central and Eastern Europe. But even in gaining its coveted European Security Conference, Moscow unwittingly opened the way for Western penetration of its East European glacis through CSCE Basket 3 human rights provisions. The edifice of the post-war order remained intact, but Kissinger's (and Kennan's) asymmetrical containment strategy began the slow process

of reforming the European political order from the inside out.

Oh, yes, the FRG also obtained Brandt's other goal of greater maneuver room for FRG statecraft in inner-German and Central European affairs. That process, so critical today for the future of Europe, continues.

SOURCES: I have relied on the assigned and supplemental readings for topic 14 in preparing this paper (Brandt's People and Politics, Kissinger's White House Years, Brown's Faces of Power, plus Gaddis' Strategies of Containment and Chaliand and Rageau's Strategic Atlas. In addition, the conclusions drawn largely reflect perspectives I developed while Ambassador's Aide and Political Officer at Embassy Bonn (1980-1982). During that assignment, especially when I was the U.S. Bonn Group representative, I had the opportunity to become familiar both with the complex history of "Berlin theology" and the key personalities who have shaped contemporary Germany.