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WILLY BRANDT AND OSTPOLITIK

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# Report Documentation Page

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"We could not become the last of the Cold War warriors, the opponents of change and thus, perhaps the world's leading trouble-makers (and whipping-boys)."

Willy Brandt, "Ostpolitik" and "Erfurt, Kassel, and Berlin," in People and Politics: The Years 1960-1975 (Boston: Little Brown, 1976, p. 167).

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the grand strategy and statecraft of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt. More specifically, it is an analysis of Brandt's policy of Ostpolitik which dominated the conduct of West German foreign affairs during Brandt's Chancellorship from 1969 to 1975. Broadly speaking, Ostpolitik is a term that has come to describe a policy which sought new openings to the East, a trend toward conciliation in Central Europe and, above all for West Germany, a change in dealing with the issue of a divided Germany. Perhaps the first question we should answer is how the newly elected Social Democratic government of Willy Brandt arrived at this general policy?

## WEST GERMANY'S NATIONAL INTERESTS

Willy Brandt became convinced that a change of policy in dealing with the East was necessary for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the ineffectiveness of current and past policies. He believed that the Cold War policy of containment, which may have succeeded in thwarting

Soviet expansion in post-World War II Europe, had done little to solve postwar problems that were of primary concern to a resurrected West Germany's interests. Reoccurring crises over Berlin and the failure to solve the question of a divided Germany were just two of these problems. Brandt was also motivated by the possibility of greater economic opportunity for trade with the East. No doubt, he saw new openings to the East as expanding markets for high quality West German goods. While Brandt realized that continued alliance with the West was still in the vital national security interests of West Germany, he was also convinced that a more independent voice in foreign policy might best serve what he perceived as the long-term national interest. Above all, however, Brandt believed that the reconciliation and eventual reunification of the German people were of paramount concern. And it was this concern which led him toward Ostpolitik.

#### THREATS TO WEST GERMAN INTERESTS

As noted above then, Brandt saw West Germany's interests as follows: 1) continued alliance with the West; 2) lessening of political tensions/confrontations in Central Europe; 3) economic expansion of trade with the East; and 4) reconciliation/reunification of the German people. The threats to these interests were many and came not only from foes, but friends alike.

Perhaps the most obvious threats to West German interests came from the Soviet Union's power and hold on Eastern Europe. The Soviets were somewhat ambivalent about Brandt's Ostpolitik. On the one hand, by 1969-70, they were engaging the West (especially the United States) in detente; on the other hand, they were wary over West German approaches to individual Warsaw Pact countries. No doubt, the Soviet's historical concern over German resurgence was a key factor in Soviet behavior. In addition, it's likely that the Soviets were even more wary of a Social Democratic government in West Germany which had the potential to influence East Europeans perhaps more than its predecessor, the more conservative Christian Democrats. In any case, the Soviets did not make it easy for Brandt to approach the East.

Even more intransigent than the Soviets, however, were the East Germans. The GDR was absolutely opposed to Brandt's early overtures and were only interested in securing one thing - West German recognition of East Germany as a separate state. As a result, Brandt had a difficult time overcoming the GDR's aversion to negotiate with the West.

To a certain degree, Brandt's own allies were less than enthusiastic over Ostpolitik. While economic considerations may have played some role in the West's lukewarm response to Brandt's policy, the most likely motivation was the Western

Allies' wariness about a revived/reunited Germany. Memories of two world wars had not significantly faded by 1969.

Suffice it to say that Brandt's prescription for West German national interests came up against some fairly significant external opposition. Let's now turn our attention to how Brandt assessed these threats, the relative power of the states concerned, and how his assessment affected his grand strategy.

In all likelihood, Brandt viewed the East-West balance of power as roughly in a state of equilibrium (especially in a military sense). By remaining within the Western Alliance, therefore, he felt "safe" in approaching the East. On the other hand, he realized that the West was not about to attempt forceably to alter the postwar status in Eastern Europe. He therefore felt compelled to strike out on a new initiative to address postwar problems in Central Europe. Probably central to Brandt's assessment of relative power was the confidence he had in the economic power of the West, which he undoubtedly saw as a "carrot" to be held out to the East. Brandt was keenly aware, however, that he continually walked a tightrope between East and West, with both wary allies and foes alike. In his grand strategy of rapprochement with the East, he therefore moved carefully and cautiously. Recognizing there was little he could do to influence East Germany, he determined that to succeed, he

would have to lay the necessary groundwork with both the Soviets and the Western Allies first.

#### OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

Much to Brandt's credit as a statesman, he was able to recognize early the United States' realpolitik approach to Soviet-American relations and use this to his advantage. The Nixon-Kissinger opening to the Soviet Union (detente) provided Brandt the opportunity to pursue Ostpolitik in earnest. In addition, detente took some of the domestic pressure off Brandt at home. The opposition Christian Democrats were at best warily supportive of Brandt's overtures to the East. Only by virtue of the United States' detente with the Soviets and the ever lingering West Germans' hope for a reunification was Brandt able to muster domestic support for Ostpolitik.

#### BRANDT'S OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES

Seizing on the opportunity presented by US-Soviet detente and the muted opposition of his Christian Democratic opponents, Brandt set upon a course to "normalize" relations with the East. His ultimate objective was to provide a framework for East-West relations that would lead to a solution of the "German question". Specifically, Brandt hoped to pave the road to ultimate German reunification. However, he was well aware of the extreme difficulties in achieving this goal. He therefore decided upon less

ambitious short-term objectives that were designed to lessen East-West tensions, open dialogues on a number of issues of mutual concern with the Soviets and other East European states, and establish inter-German relations on a basis of equal rights. The economic benefits of increased East-West contacts were not lost upon Brandt, but these were clearly a secondary priority.

#### BRANDT'S PLAN FOR OSTPOLITIK

Brandt believed that his plan for achieving his ultimate objective - German reunification - was both realistic and well thought out. He was conscious of the obstacles placed in his way by both the East and the West and decided to chip away at the barriers a piece at a time. His overall plan was to open discussions with both the Soviet Union and the other East European states bilaterally on a variety of issues, including travel, trade, and other economic concerns. Subsequently, he entered into the first serious postwar dialogue with representatives of the GDR on a host of issues, all well below the level of reunification. Clearly, Brandt's hope was that these negotiations would eventually lead to agreements on more significant issues.

The tools Brandt hoped to employ in his plan were many and varied. In the largest sense, he opted for the use of diplomacy above all others. Within that context, however, he used the attraction of increased East-West trade to lure East European states (especially the GDR) to the conference

table. In addition, he attempted to use public diplomacy in his dealings with the GDR. His much publicized visit to East Germany in 1969 to meet with Willi Stoph, the Chairman of the GDR's Council of Ministers, had a powerful effect on all Germans. The danger of such summits, however, became painfully clear to Brandt when the visit was reciprocated and Brandt was publicly embarrassed by extremist groups who made Stoph's visit to the West the subject of unruly protests. But perhaps the most effective tool Brandt used in Ostpolitik was the leverage applied on the GDR by the Soviets who were themselves negotiating with Brandt's government on a number of issues. Brandt was able to use the prospect of successful talks with the Soviets to pressure the more recalcitrant East Germans to move beyond repeated denunciations of the West during their talks and engage in serious negotiations to normalize relations.

#### SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Brandt himself was very forthcoming in his assessment of the success of Ostpolitik. He admitted that the overall policy produced mixed results. Over the course of two long years of negotiations a number of significant agreements were signed between the GDR and Bonn. A Basic Treaty established a framework for the two states to "cooperate" in settling practical and humanitarian problems and renounced the use of force. In addition, Bonn and the GDR agreed upon a number of other issues, to include, respect of mutual

internal sovereignty, recognizing Four Power responsibility for Berlin, expanded tourist traffic, sports, science and cultural exchanges, increased trade, and a settlement relating to membership in the United Nations. However, as Brandt himself would later write, "numerous though they were, these major and minor steps did not directly bring us closer to the goal of German unity". In the end, Brandt's policy and grand strategy fell somewhat short of his long-term goal.

There are a number of explanations for Brandt's failure to achieve complete success. First of all, one can argue that the goal of German reunification was simply much too ambitious and unattainable, even in the light of US-Soviet detente in the early 1970's. For all of Brandt's careful calculations and his deft use of diplomacy, he was unable to achieve his ultimate goal. The Soviets were certainly wary of any significant progress toward German reunification; and while they were willing to encourage the GDR to reach agreements with Bonn on a number of lesser issues, the specter of a strong, reunited Germany was certainly not in the Soviets' best interests. Likewise, the Western Allies were not enamoured with the idea of a powerful new Germany in the center of Europe, especially if that Germany adopted a more independent foreign policy. The United States, for example, was willing to encourage Brandt's overtures to the East, but only under certain conditions. First, the United States kept close tabs on the progress of Bonn's dealings

with the East through Henry Kissinger's private contacts with Brandt's negotiator. To be sure, the United States did not want Brandt getting "too far out front" on East-West negotiations. Secondly, the United States was careful to ensure that any significant agreements between Bonn and the GDR were wrapped tightly into the larger set of negotiations between East and West. A good example of this was the ultimate agreements reached by all parties on Berlin. While Brandt's interest level in these agreements was high, the agreements were driven by the Four Powers' interests and, in some instances, at Bonn's expense.

Even if the Soviets and Bonn's Western Allies had been more inclined to support moves toward German reunification, it is almost certain that the GDR would never have agreed, unless reunification took place under Communist East German control. This, of course, was entirely out of the question. Brandt was well aware of the GDR's opposition on this issue and, as noted above, tried to use the Soviets' leverage on the GDR. It's possible that Brandt may have either underestimated the GDR's recalcitrance or overestimated his own ability to influence this issue - perhaps a little of both. This was, however, the major flaw in his long term plan. While the East Germans wanted greater economic ties with the West very badly, they were not willing to "sell the farm" to secure economic assistance.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Having concluded that Brandt's policy of Ostpolitik was only marginally successful, what possible lessons can we draw from Brandt's statecraft? Without question, Brandt's openings to the East did help to lessen East-West tensions and provided some normalization of relations between the two Germanys. This was done with little damage to the West. We might conclude therefore that sometimes bold initiatives are necessary to get things moving in international relations. The East-West dialogues begun as a result of Brandt's Ostpolitik were useful, if not always overly fruitful. On the other hand, Brandt's experience shows us that once things do get moving, expectations can have a tendency to outrun reality. Despite his protests to the contrary, Brandt may have allowed wishful thinking to overcome more reasoned judgment. It's been twenty years since Brandt traveled to Erfurt, East Germany in search of a solution to the "German question". Many today would claim that we are no closer to a solution now than Brandt was then. Only time will tell. Currently, the winds of change seem to be stirring in Eastern Europe. It remains to be seen in which direction they will blow and how they will affect inter-German relations.