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## *Across the Elbe:* the gamble of devolution

Josef Joffe

**W**hat Richard Löwenthal has called West Germany's "separate conflict" with the East,<sup>1</sup> has long been an important feature of the East-West scene. Specifically the conflict centred on the Federal Republic's refusal to accept, let alone ratify, the territorial consequences of World War II, i.e. to legitimize territorial amputation in the East, in favour of Poland and the Soviet Union, and the partition of Germany into two separate States.

This "separate conflict" was laid to rest with Willy Brandt's accession to the West German Chancellorship in the autumn of 1969, and the launching of the "New *Ostpolitik*", whose main girders - the treaties with Moscow, Warsaw, Prague and East Berlin - were all in place by 1973. On its most obvious level, Brandt's *Ostpolitik* merely executed what necessity demanded. The New *Ostpolitik* finally conceded the *status quo*, though with meaningful qualifications,<sup>2</sup> ending a "separate conflict" that the Federal Republic simply could no longer sustain. From the very beginning, Germany's pawn had indeed been overtaxed by the effort to maintain what were, after all, revisionist claims against a European-based superpower and its allies, and the FRG could possibly uphold these claims only on the basis of derivative or borrowed strength. The "loan" was originally extended during the Federal Republic's grand bargain with the West in 1955 by which Bonn regained (partial) sovereignty and membership in the Atlantic Alliance. In exchange for tying itself to the West, notably by integrating all of its armed forces in NATO, the Federal Republic gained a series of Western pledges in support of its claims

against the East. The United States, France and Britain would not recognize the GDR; they would not consent to the "final determination of the borders of Germany" outside a freely negotiated peace settlement; and they avowed as their "common aim" a "reunified Germany enjoying a liberal democratic constitution like that of the Federal Republic."<sup>3</sup>

### Victor by adoption

By implication, the Federal Republic had thus gained a veto power over its allies' policies toward the East. Throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Western policy had been "Germanized" in the sense that the resolution of East-West issues had been made dependent on a "German precondition." Progress on the German question, as the Bonn doxology put it, had become a *condition préalable* to all other agreements, and given the fact that Soviet insistence on the *consacration* of the postwar *status quo*, made all "progress on the German question" practically impossible, negotiations were systematically deadlocked. Since there was no movement on reunification, there was no movement on anything else, for example on *détente*, arms control or a European security system which the Soviets kept pushing to the top of the East-West agenda. Yet this was precisely the underlying purpose of the link forged by Bonn. Western policy had to be "Germanized," which meant that it had to be kept from agreement with the East, because Bonn dreaded one danger above all: the restoration of the wartime coalition by which the four victor powers would once more impose their will on Germany.

If Bismarck had been obsessed by the *cauchemar des coalitions*, Konrad Adenauer's nightmare could be named "Potsdam:"

"It is no coincidence that the Soviets keep referring to [the Potsdam] agreement over and over again. To them, it represents an eternal Morgenthau Plan imposed by the four powers... Every Soviet reference to this agreement constitutes a Soviet invitation to the West to conclude a similar bargain on our backs... Potsdam signifies nothing but: Let us strike a bargain at Germany's expense... Bismarck spoke about his nightmare of coalitions against Germany. I have my own nightmare: Its name is Potsdam. The danger of a collusive great power policy at Germany's expense has existed since 1945, and it has continued to exist even after the Federal Republic was established. And the foreign policy of the Federal Government has always been aimed at escaping from this

danger zone. For Germany must not fall between the grindstones. If it does, it will be lost.”<sup>4</sup>

To have the whole West accept the FRG’s separate conflict with the East as its own, was the basic ambition of Germany’s *Ostpolitik* before Willy Brandt’s advent to power. This classic small-power strategy (“my conflict is the essence of yours”) worked well throughout the Cold War. Yet no power, let alone a great power, is willing to extend a permanent veto power to client States. By the end of the 1960s, West Germany’s “borrowed strength” had dwindled to nothing. The two superpowers had played with power-sharing arrangements as early as the mid-1960s, when they jointly authored the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and, by the end of the decade, they were about to launch a determined push toward *détente*, that eventually brought about the SALT agreement. Moreover, also a middle-sized power, France, under De Gaulle, had proceeded with its own opening to the Soviet Union - and without regard to West German sensitivities, let alone to Bonn’s reunification claims.

Stuck with its separate conflict, the FRG had to go along with the others, or to go it alone, facing a spectre only slightly less oppressive than the “nightmare of coalitions:” the prospect of abandonment and isolation. Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* was thus just the overdue acceptance of reality. Or, as his Parliamentary Leader, Herbert Wehner, put it: “Up to now, we have lived beyond our means - as if we had been a victor power by adoption.”<sup>5</sup> And Brandt himself invoked Bismarck and Adenauer as he fought for the ratification of the Eastern Treaties: “An anti-German coalition had been Bismarck’s as well as Adenauer’s nightmare. We, too, are faced with this problem, and we should make sure that our own policy does not turn this problem into a burden.”<sup>6</sup>

### **A diplomatic revolution**

*Ostpolitik* from 1969 to 1973 executed what necessity demanded, reinserting the Federal Republic into the mainstream of Western diplomacy. But there was more. In essence, the New *Ostpolitik* launched something that amounted to a diplomatic revolution in West German foreign policy, consisting of three parts.

First, it resolved Bonn’s separate conflict with the East; instead of untenable revisionist claims, there were now contractual arrangements (opening the way to diplomatic relations with all of Europe) that virtually amounted to a peace settlement of World War II. Self-denial in Eastern Europe gave way to massive

engagement. The stubbornly pursued isolation of the GDR was shelved in favour of progressive co-operation. And Bonn, which used to be the brakeman of *détente* in Europe moved to its vanguard as driver and accelerator.

Second, there was the escape from the exclusive reliance on the West. "At best you can stand on one leg [i.e., the Western Alliance], but you can't walk on it,"<sup>7</sup> said Herbert Wehner, the Floor Leader of the Social Democrats, in the Bundestag in 1974. Or as Willy Brandt's successor, Helmut Schmidt, put it: "Our margin of diplomatic manoeuvre has been extraordinarily enlarged." The Eastern Treaties "have largely...liberated our country from its role as a client...who believed almost incessantly that he needed yet another pledge of assurance from his patron powers. [Moreover] our treaties with Moscow, Warsaw, East Berlin and so forth, as well as the Four-Power Agreement [on Berlin] have greatly reduced the numerous reasons we had in those days to seek, and beg for, continuous reassurance."<sup>8</sup>

Third, and most significant, the New *Ostpolitik* set in motion a process that might be labelled "the subtle subversion of bipolarity," hence of Europe's postwar order. Why should this be so? To elucidate the point, it is instructive to compare the "Old *Ostpolitik*" with the New.





Revolving around the refusal to accept partition and territorial amputation, the *Ostpolitik* of Adenauer and his Christian Democratic successors<sup>9</sup> had merely embroiled the Federal Republic in an unwinnable conflict with the Soviet Union. The best the Old *Ostpolitik* could do was to block evolution by insisting on conditions for movement (e.g. German reunification under Western auspices) which rendered movement impossible. Though revisionist in theory and language, Adenauer's *Ostpolitik* was thus in effect a *status quo* policy in practice. It affirmed the old order in the very process of pretending to challenge it.

Indeed, Adenauer's success depended on the continual *reassertion* of bipolarity in Europe. On the other hand, German *préalable* could only flourish under conditions of tight bloc solidarity in the West, centered on an intimate German-American special relationship. German derivative power could only be obtained if the United States above all accepted West Germany's special conflict as its own. In return, the Federal Republic became America's most faithful ally in Europe - and the most arduous opponent of anybody who, like De Gaulle, would weaken the Atlantic tie. Throughout the 1960s, West Germany's peculiar dependence on its transatlantic patron served as a powerful guarantor of America's pre-eminent position on the Continent.

On the other hand, this strategy played willy-nilly into the hands of the Soviet Union. The (unintended) effect of the Federal Republic's revisionism, sanctioned as it was by the U.S. and NATO as a whole, was to tighten bloc cohesion in the East. The FRG's claims were directed against Moscow and two of its key allies, the GDR and Poland; hence, all three could wield German revanchism as profitable tool of bloc discipline. Indeed, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, East Germany was able to assume a role in the Warsaw Pact that was the mirror image of West Germany's in NATO: as intimate junior partner of Moscow and as guardian of bloc orthodoxy.

### **The subtle subversion**

The "New *Ostpolitik*", by contrast, was bound to act as the solvent of bipolarity. The transformation unfolded on two levels. On the most obvious level, *within* the existing bipolar system, the New *Ostpolitik* loosened the bonds of dependence between clients and superpowers - first and most rapidly, of course, those between the Federal Republic and the United States (and the FRG's major Western allies). But in a mirror image process and more slowly,

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the New *Ostpolitik* did the same for the GDR and Eastern Europe as a whole. The Old *Ostpolitik*, amounting essentially to a prescription for the GDR's self-liquidation, had pushed the GDR into an excruciating dependence on the Soviet Union (as well as on Poland and the Czechoslovakia). The New *Ostpolitik*, on the other hand, offering "contractually regulated coexistence" plus economic benefits, evidently strengthened the legitimacy of the East Berlin regime and enlarged its margin of manoeuvre. By extension, West Germany's renunciation of old revisionist claims enhanced the diplomatic freedom of *all* non-Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact.

The second level of change pertains to the bipolar system as such. Though the task here is far more ambitious, the logic of *Ostpolitik* is again simple enough. Since bipolarity is the underlying cause of Germany's unnatural condition, since it is the presence of two antagonist politico-military blocs in the heart of Europe that divides Germans from Germans, relief can only flow from a reformed European order. In that respect, there is, paradoxically, an underlying continuity between Adenauer's and the New *Ostpolitik*: the enduring need to "Germanize" East-West relations on Europe.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the resolution of the German problem was predicated to reunification through *Anschluss* - a mere annexation of East Germany to the FRG - hence on a fundamental transformation of the European balance in favour of the West. Today, the objective is no longer *Anschluss*, but the progressive reassociation of "two States in one nation," and the means to the end is not some kind of "roll-back" but the progressive fusion of all of Europe in an atmosphere of *détente* and East-West amity. Or as Willy Brandt had put it

as early as 1967, Bonn would no longer “burden the policy of *détente* in Europe with any preconditions” because “the problems of Europe like those of Germany cannot be settled in a Cold War atmosphere.”<sup>10</sup> The basic game has changed from Adenauer’s “open *status quo*” (and waiting for a better day) to a “mobile *status quo*” (that will bring the day nearer step by step), but in either case, the nature of the European system remains the penultimate permissive variable of German policy. On its deepest level, then, *Ostpolitik* is system transformation.

How then must the system change to accommodate German national aspirations? At first sight, this is a paradoxical way of phrasing the issue, since the very *leitmotif* of *Ostpolitik* from Willy Brandt to Helmut Kohl is the scrupulous refusal to challenge the political and territorial *status quo* in Central/Eastern Europe. Yet it is stability with a dialectical twist. Precisely by paying relentless homage to the realities of power and control, *Ostpolitik* from 1969 onward hopes to loosen their harsh grip to the point where the falling barriers of separation turn reunification into an irrelevant, because unnecessary, objective. The task of system transformation must, however, begin not on the external but on the domestic level - on the premise that *reassured* regimes will also be *relaxed* regimes. Secure in their rule, the East European regimes might relinquish the worst of authoritarian controls and deliver to their citizens that measure of liberty that would take the sting out of partition in Germany and Europe.

*Ostpolitik* postulates that a substantial part of regime insecurity in the East derives from ideological confrontation in Europe (hence Bonn’s stubborn refusal to follow the Reagan Administration’s punitive approach against the Jaruzelski regime after the imposition of martial law in December of 1981). Ideological rivalry must be muted, if not set aside completely; communist regimes must no longer be targeted as enemies but be treated as partners in cooperation. In the East, political reassurance plus economic benefits from abroad must serve as the functional equivalent of democratic legitimation at home - on the assumption that confident regimes from East Berlin to Warsaw will then act to undo (at least in part) what bipolarity has wrought. Similarly, seeing its *glacis* secure and unchallenged, the Soviet Union will relax imperial controls in Eastern Europe. Its cohorts will then enjoy a larger margin of manoeuvre, in terms of both domestic liberalization and diplomatic movement. Presumably, such a dynamic will set in motion a virtuous cycle - with reforms enhancing domestic consent, and the latter allowing for ever more reforms. And so,

though still set apart by different alliance obligations, Europe will inexorably grow together again - linked by a flourishing network of trade, travel and all manners of communication and co-operation.

### Towards "self-assertion"

Yet this is not enough. *Ostpolitik* (at least in its more radical version as envisioned by the German left) also assumes that Moscow's imperial system in Eastern Europe is not a completely autonomous given, but at least in part the function of the existence of a competitive politico-military system in the Western half of the Continent. Whence it follows that the military confrontation must be muted, too - indeed, that the very structure of the bipolar system must be reformed, perhaps even dismantled, to the point where military power loses its grip on the policies and polities of Europe.

It is the bipolar concentration of military, especially nuclear, force in Europe that chains allies to superpowers and renders *déclassées* the nations in between. Conversely, if the hold of military power were to weaken, dependence will dwindle and the *Selbstbehauptung Europas* (the "self-assertion of Europe"), as a favourite shibboleth of the German left has it, will flourish. Take the following scenario, sketched out by an ideologue of the West German "national left," which describes a European future minus dependence on American power:

"If we succeed in turning Central Europe step by step into a zone, where nuclear, biological and chemical weapons are no longer stationed, while simultaneously diminishing the conventional superiority of the Warsaw Pact - excessively exaggerated by NATO horror visions as it is - through appropriate troop reductions and the restructuring of forces for strictly defensive purposes, then the member States of the Western European Union (WEU) will be capable of assuring sufficient deterrence on their own..."<sup>11</sup>

In this scenario, the ancient problem of the European military balance - how to hold in check the Soviet Union without American help - would no longer matter. If achieved, the new system would merely render explicit "the Soviet Union's...paramount interest in a partnership - like co-operation with Western Europe. It is obvious that the strongest possible security guarantee for Western Europe derives in the long term precisely from this interest."<sup>12</sup> And why would



this be so? Under Gorbachev, “the Soviet Union is in the midst of a fundamental reorientation of its foreign policy. It will have to decide whether its status as a world power is not better served by its opening toward, and cooperation with, Western Europe than by the obsolete co-domination over Germany and Europe as is today shared with the Americans.”<sup>13</sup> In short, Western Europe’s security problem will disappear because the Soviet Union will balance its own power, as it were, by a consistent policy of self-denial. All these may be dreams, but they render explicit the underlying aspiration - and the central dilemma - of *Ostpolitik*.

### A revolutionary confluence

The postwar sub-order was built around the partition of Germany and Europe. To overcome both, that order must evidently be changed. To be sure, the two German States were originally the greatest profiteers of bipolarity. Instead of indefinite subjection to the four victor powers, Germany was reincarnated on either side of the Elbe river. Soon rehabilitated, both the German States became the very pillars of their respective alliance systems. Yet today, no matter how successful and powerful, they are still the greatest victims of bipolarity: tightly circumscribed in their sovereignty and chained to inimical military blocs by security dependence on distant superpowers.

So the dreams respond to an underlying reality. And it does not take a dreamer to grasp that both reason of State and reason of nation bid the Federal Republic (and *mutatis mutandis*, the GDR) to loosen the strictures of bipolarity. How far the postwar system has already changed can be measured in terms of a radically transformed inter-German relationship. Formerly in the vanguard of the Cold War, they are now the standard bearers of *détente*. Locked in hostile competition before, they have become tacit allies in bloc-transcending cooperation. Symbolized by the pomp and circumstance of Erich Honecker’s week-long visit to the Federal Republic in the fall of 1987, that tacit partnership goes back to the beginning of the 1980s. In those days, when a new Cold War threatened to engulf Central Europe, too, both Helmut Schmidt and Erich Honecker began to talk about *Verantwortungsgemeinschaft* (“community of responsibility”) which is but another word for a separate, inter-German *détente* that must flourish independently from the ups and downs of the superpower relationship and seek to enlarge the interstices of bipolarity.<sup>14</sup>

Nor is this permanent *détente* imperative limited to the left. It unites Christian

Democrats and Social Democrats, Greens as well as Free Democrats. Indeed, the tacit alliance with East Germany and the permanent quest for good relations



with the Soviet Union signify the revolutionary confluence of three *raisons*, which used to be at odds with each other - and made for the peculiar, artificial truncation of foreign policy - in the early history of the Federal Republic. In the immediate postwar period, *raison d'être* bade the young Federal Republic to forsake what could be called *raison de nation* for the sake of speedy consolidation under Western auspices. An overriding demand for security and the fear of renewed four-power collusion dictated a policy that would rather sacrifice reunification-cum-neutralization in favour of sovereignty and tight alliance integration. What might be called *raison de régime* additionally buttressed West Germany's Western-oriented *raison d'état*. In a Cold War atmosphere, rigorous anti-communism and pro-Westernism helped to stabilize the long-run tenure of Konrad Adenauer's conservative coalitions and to discredit the neutralist-pacifist tendencies of his Social Democratic rivals. Today, the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition under Helmut Kohl is hardly less dedicated to disarmament and *détente* than the SPD. Far from seeking to guarantee its tenure with the anti-communist and anti-Soviet rhetoric of yore, it seeks to attract electoral support by virtually outflanking the left in matters of arms control and *détente*.

In short, for the first time in the Federal Republic's history, reason of regime, reason of nation and reason of State all point in the same direction - and, willy-nilly, away from a role by which the Federal Republic has traditionally acted as the very pillar of the Western alliance system in Europe. The rationale is evident enough. Domestically, no West German regime can presently survive in power unless it pays relentless homage to the new Eastern dimension of the FRG's foreign policy. Diplomatically, any West German government, presiding over the strongest conventional power in Western Europe, cannot but seek to lighten the remaining legacies of World War II by responding to a simple equation: Less bipolarity equals less dependence, and less dependence equals more freedom of movement. In turn, this will benefit *raison de nation* : in terms of the progressive reassociation of the two Germanies within a relationship where the inter-German border is no more forbidding than the one between Austria and the Federal Republic today.

Pursued to its logical extreme, this process would evidently unhinge the bipolar postwar system. That order was built around and in divided Germany. It must logically collapse once the two Germanies no longer assume their traditional roles in that order: as braces of their respective alliance systems and as forward-bastions of mutual containment, both military and political.

If and when the two Germanies are closer to each other than to their own alliances, meaning that nationality has triumphed over ideology, then the *ancien régime* must perforce lose its meaning. The Soviet Union would lose the very keystone of its empire in Eastern Europe; the United States would be thrown back to a rump alliance along the rim of Western Europe with dubious survival value.

How far will that process go? How far can it go? Whether it will lead to reunification is the wrong question. The dynamics of "subtle subversion" are driven precisely by the fact that the two Germanies no longer treat each other as object of an eventual *Anschluss* (which blocked all movement) but as tacit allies in transformation. And transformation works precisely because they no longer question each other's separate statehood. Nor do they try to lever each other out of their respective alliance systems. It is not ideological or geopolitical rivalry but almost "competition by kindness", whereby the Federal Republic in particular showers economic rewards on the GDR to break down the walls of national and political separation and thus to make reunification unnecessary.



### The enduring facts

Yet the two Germanies are not only the pillars but also the *products* of the postwar European system, based on the dominant position of the superpowers on either side of the divide. That reality, whose disappearance remains hard to conceive in our time, implies stringent limits on the freedom of the lesser powers, and on the two Germanies above all. They can experiment with all kinds of system-transcending policies, yet they are free to do so only as long as the essentials remain untouched. The contemporary system, though a far cry from the "tight bipolarity" of the 1940s and 1950s, still remains low on flexibility and choice, and it delivers few trumps and options.

As products of the postwar system, the two Germanies have also paid the highest price for the marvellous stability of that order. Given that price, the German gamble is necessarily one of devolution. But devolution toward what and whom? On the West German left, the emerging reply seems to be the answer (and temptation) of traditional German nationalism: Together Germany (with Western Europe in tow) and Russia can manage the European order - with the Federal Republic serving as a conduit of technology and economic assistance<sup>15</sup> and the Soviet Union content to forsake domination in favour of co-operation. If history is a guide, this is a prescription for disaster. Whenever this strategy was tried, whether by Bismarck or the Weimar Republic, war followed. The answer of the centre-right seems to be alliance in the West plus a special relationship with the East which would combine maximum protection with maximal freedom of manoeuvre. This would maintain the Federal Republic's Western/Atlantic ties but expose it to an ever more complicated balancing act which no German regime - from the Second Reich to the First Republic (Weimar) has ever been able to sustain for any length of time.

In the end, however, there is a larger problem. Arguably, the gamble of devolution will be determined first and foremost by the authors of the old order. For it is the United States and the Soviet Union which continue to be the principals in this game because there are no equivalent competitors. Real devolution will surely require the withdrawal of both superpowers from the order they built after 1945 - and the one that continues to remain the fulcrum of the global balance. Yet under what circumstances would the Soviet Union voluntarily relinquish its pontifical and political empire in Eastern Europe? Conceivably, the United States may retract if so told by its allies, but short of real integration, the West Europeans must still live with an iron-clad reality:



They must assure their security against a superpower that cannot vanish from Europe because it is in and of Europe. *Faute de mieux*, the United States thus remains Western Europe's natural protector. And so, devolution poses a lasting question for Germans and Europeans alike: How far can it go without colliding with the enduring facts of dependence?

## References

- 1 - Richard Löwenthal, *Vom kalten Krieg zur Ostpolitik*, Seewald, Stuttgart, 1974.
- 2 - The treaties with Moscow and Warsaw certified the "inviolability" of existing borders, but left formal ratification to a peace treaty between Germany and the victor powers of World War II. *De jure* recognition was withheld from East Germany in order to maintain the construct of "two States within one nation." The subtle distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* is symbolized by the fact that both states maintain "permanent missions" rather than embassies in each other's capitals.
- 3 - For a more detailed analysis, see Josef Joffe, "The Foreign Policy of the Federal Republic of Germany," in Roy Macridis, ed., *Foreign Policy in World Politics*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1985, pp. 81-89.
- 4 - In an interview with Ernst Friedländer, June 11, 1953. Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, *Mitteilungen an die Presse*, no. 561/53, pp. 3-4.
- 5 - As quoted in *Die Welt*, February 20, 1967.
- 6 - *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages*, May 17, 1972, p. 10897.
- 7 - Herbert Wehner, Parliamentary Leader of the Social Democrats, before the Bundestag, November 6, 1974. *Texte zur Deutschlandpolitik*, Series II, vol. 2, Bundesministerium für innerdeutsche Beziehungen, Bonn, 1976, p. 295.
- 8 - Address to the Bundestag, July 25, 1975. *Bulletin*, July 29, 1975.
- 9 - In 1963, Konrad Adenauer was replaced by Ludwig Erhard, who governed until 1966, when Kurt-Georg Kiesinger assumed the leadership of a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats (with the SPD's Willy Brandt as vice-chancellor and foreign minister).
- 10 - Willy Brandt, the Foreign Minister of the CDU-led Grand Coalition, before the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, January 24, 1967. Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, *Bulletin*, no. 8, January 26, 1967.
- 11 - Gerhard Heimann (a Bundestag deputy of the SPD), "Vor einer Renaissance des europäischen Staatensystems? Chancen für eine zweite Stufe der Ostpolitik," in Michael Müller et al., *Gorbatschows Reformen - Chancen für Europa*, Dietz, Berlin and Bonn, 1987, p. 55.
- 12 - *Ibidem*, p. 156.
- 13 - *Ibidem*
- 14 - For an elaboration, see J. Joffe, "The Tacit Alliance," in Lincoln Gordon, et al., *Eroding Empire: Western Relations with Eastern Europe*, Brookings Institution, Washington, 1987.
- 15 - See Heimann, *og cit.*, p. 156. According to him, Western Europe, and the FRG in particular, are economically more attractive to the Soviet Union than the United States: "What is lacking in natural resources in Western Europe, the Soviet Union possesses richly. In exchange, the Soviet Union needs the advanced technology and industrial infrastructure available in Western Europe."