

## American Détente and German Ostpolitik, 1969-72

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### Conference at the [German Historical Institute \(GHI\)](#), May 9 and 10, 2002.

**Co-sponsored** by the [Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung](#), Berlin, the [Cold War International History Project \(CWIHP\)](#), Washington D.C., and the [Parallel History Project on NATO and Warsaw Pact \(PHP\)](#), Washington D.C./Zurich/Vienna/Florence/Oslo.

**Conveners:** Bernd Schäfer (GHI) and Carsten Tessmer (Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung).

**Participants:** Egon Bahr (Bonn), David Binder (New York Times), Chen Jian (University of Virginia), Jonathan Dean (Union of Concerned Scientists), David C. Geyer (U.S. Department of State), Hope M. Harrison (George Washington University), Wjatscheslaw Keworkow (Bonn), Melvyn P. Leffler (University of Virginia), Vojtech Mastny (PHP, National Security Archive), Gottfried Niedhart (Universität Mannheim), Christian Ostermann (CWIHP, Woodrow Wilson International Center), Mary E. Sarotte (Cambridge University, UK), Douglas E. Selva (U.S. Department of State), Kenneth N. Skoug (Alexandria, VA), Helmut Sonnenfeldt (The Brookings Institution), James S. Sutterlin (International Studies at Yale University).

On the night of the West German election in September 1969, U.S. President Richard Nixon called Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger in Bonn and prematurely congratulated him on his electoral victory. But since the CDU/CSU, which the White House regarded as their "friends" in Germany, failed to win an absolute majority of seats in parliament, a SPD/FDP coalition headed by Willy Brandt came to power, much to the consternation of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. This new government soon started foreign policy initiatives and negotiations with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, leading to highly contentious domestic debates in West Germany and finally to the ratification of treaties with Moscow, Warsaw, and East Berlin in 1972/1973. The architect, promoter, and chief executor of this self-reliant and assertive new German Ostpolitik was Egon Bahr, Minister of State at the German Federal Chancellery throughout Willy Brandt's chancellorship from 1969 to 1974. This Ostpolitik changed the dynamics of German-American relations. Reactions within the frequently baffled Nixon administration ranged from serious reservations in the White House to solid support in the State Department. Initially, the American government, which had pursued its own tactical "detente" with Moscow before Brandt came into power, had not been enthusiastic about similar activities by European allies. These were regarded as rival concepts coming into conflict with U.S. policy. This pattern was modified, however, when the Nixon White House became so entangled in "linkages" and "reverse linkages" with Moscow and Beijing, that West Germany's treaties with the East and a quadripartite agreement on Berlin became identical with U.S. interests in 1971/72.

Commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the dramatic weeks of April and May 1972, when Willy Brandt barely survived a no-confidence motion and secured the parliamentary passage of the treaties with the East (Ostverträge) a few weeks later, the GHI and the Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung hosted a two-day conference with an international group of scholars and contemporary participants in the events. Co-sponsoring this event and furthering its outreach into the scholarly "cold war history community" were the Washington- and Zurich-based Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP) at the National Security Archive and the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) at the Woodrow Wilson International Center. The conference participants were welcomed by Christof Mauch (GHI) and Gerhard Groß (Bundeskanzler-Willy-Brandt-Stiftung) on behalf of the hosts, Vojtech Mastny (PHP) and Christian Ostermann (CWIHP) for the co-sponsors, and by Bernd Schäfer (GHI) for the conveners.

The first day of the conference was devoted to presentations by scholars, followed by discussions with the audience, in which many of the contemporary participants present shared their impressions with the historians. The morning session began with a paper by Hope M. Harrison on the significance of the 1961 construction of the Berlin Wall. She convincingly outlined the U.S. commitment to West, not East Berlin and the implied recognition of a Soviet sphere of influence. This led to long-lasting effects on certain West German political leaders and paved the way for Ostpolitik many years later. Vojtech Mastny placed the Brandt/Bahr negotiations between 1969 and 1972 into the wider context of superpower relations by presenting a critical assessment of U.S. Realpolitik concerning relations with the Soviet Union during those years. Whereas the Nixon administration reassured the USSR that it would respect its sphere of influence in Europe, the Western European advocates of détente pursued a potentially destabilizing policy towards the East by emphasizing bilateral treaties and multilateral endeavors like the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Chen Jian gave a vivid description of the "Chinese factor" by analyzing Mao's motives for the Chinese-American rapprochement of 1971/72 and pointing out the distracting effect this historic turnaround had on the Soviet Union. In fact, the Chinese "threat," as it was perceived in Moscow, alleviated Soviet concerns about accommodation with West Germany and Western Europe and instigated a policy favorable towards "détente" in Europe. How all these international strategic implications came into play over Germany, was demonstrated by David C. Geyer's analysis of the 1971 Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin. Drawing extensively on U.S. sources that were declassified over the last few years, he showed how the White House used back channels not just to outmaneuver the State Department, but also to secretly negotiate with the Soviets and the West Germans on an unprecedented diplomatic level. This session was moderated and concluded by Melvyn P. Leffler, who presented an assessment of the U.S. policy of détente, which he considered just another form of "containment," but now undertaken from an American position of extreme "weakness" due to the Vietnam involvement and domestic political factors.

The afternoon session, chaired by Gottfried Niedhart, focused on the content and origins of the actual Ostverträge. Whereas Carsten Tessler highlighted the first cornerstone of this complex, the 1970 Moscow Treaty with its mutual renunciation of force, Douglas E.

Selvaige discussed the trials and tribulations of Warsaw's Wladyslaw Gomulka in his relations with East Berlin and Moscow since the early 1960s on the basis of Polish sources. The discriminations that the Poles were experiencing from their Western and Eastern neighbors, who were nominally their allies, finally pushed them into economic rapprochement with West Germany and the 1970 Warsaw Treaty in order to preserve precarious stability at home. Mary E. Sarotte had to cancel her appearance but forwarded her paper on "International Politics and the Basic Treaty," which was read to the audience. Sarotte credited Western policymakers with helping to ease the Cold War division of Europe by obtaining East German signatures on the Basic Treaty, thus skillfully playing upon public relations and, most of all, the Sino-Soviet conflict. Bernd Schäfer shed light on the intense domestic debate over Ostpolitik by focusing on the relationship between the CDU/CDU opposition parties and the Nixon administration. Stressing the "traditional friendship" between American governments and the CDU/CSU, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger sought to stay neutral on Bonn's partisan quarrels in public, even as they quietly hoped for a political alternative to Willy Brandt. In an ironic twist, however, in the end they needed Brandt's foreign policy success in order to pursue their agenda of Nixon's reelection. As a result, Bonn's opposition leader, Rainer Barzel, who had extremely close ties with U.S. officials, learned painful lessons in Washington's Realpolitik.

On the second day, an attentive audience enjoyed the privilege of listening to often revealing statements by former political actors on the Ostpolitik stage from West Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States. David Binder, the Bonn Correspondent for the New York Times from 1967 to 1973, moderated the morning session and introduced Egon Bahr, Willy Brandt's chief negotiator of the treaties with Moscow, Warsaw, and East Berlin. Bahr gave a lively and personal overview of Ostpolitik from its beginnings in the 1960s all the way through German unification in 1989/90. Attending every session of the conference, he frequently enlightened participants with his insightful comments drawing on his wealth of experience in diplomatic negotiations. He was followed by Wjatscheslaw Keworkow, a retired general of the Committee for State Security (KGB) of the Soviet Union. In front of a U.S. audience for the first time, this Russian participant, who long stayed out of the public spotlight for obvious reasons, discussed his mission as KGB chief Yuri Andropov's liaison to the Bonn government and Egon Bahr in the years after 1969. This secret channel between the Soviet and West German governments, which Moscow had established to bypass the parallel structures of official foreign ministry diplomacy, remained intact in different forms until 1990.

The German and Soviet perspectives were followed by four statements from former high-ranking officials in the competing Washington foreign-policy bureaucracies of the White House and the State Department. Opening the field was Helmut Sonnenfeldt, formerly Senior Staff Member at the National Security Council (NSC) and a close confidant of Henry Kissinger's in German as well as European and Soviet affairs. Unfortunately Martin J. Hillenbrand, former Assistant Secretary of State and Ambassador to Germany, had to cancel his participation. The State Department perspective on Ostpolitik and the inner tensions of the administration were vividly presented by James S. Sutterlin and

Kenneth N. Skoug, who, respectively, served as Director and Deputy Director at the German desk of the Bureau of European Affairs in the State Department. The panel concluded with a presentation by Jonathan S. Dean, who had been an extremely well-informed officer at the U.S. Embassy in Bonn due to his excellent contacts with German politicians on all sides of the partisan divide.

These statements as well as parts of the discussion from the second conference day were taped with the consent of the participants, who rewarded the audience with insightful and, for the most part, frank assessments and narratives. Especially since bringing together historians and contemporary historical actors is always a risky experiment, the conference was a resounding success. The conference proceedings as well as excerpts of the transcripts will be published as a GHI in-house publication and will also be posted on the web pages of the PHP and CWIHP.

*Bernd Schäfer*