

“Cold War Politics and the German Question: Ostpolitik, U.S.-Polish Relations, and East German Foreign Policy”

Panel 80 at the German Studies Association 32nd Annual Conference
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Moderator:

Joachim Neander, Kraków

Panelists:

Stephen J. Scala, University of Maryland - College Park, “Understanding the Class Enemy: Foreign Policy Expertise in East Germany”

Jean-François Juneau, University of Montreal, “The Dilemmas of Détente and Western Unity: The United States and West German Ostpolitik, 1969-1972”

Jakub Tyskiewicz, University of Wrocław, “The German Question in U.S.-Polish Relations (1956-1970)”

Commentator and Reporter:

Bernd Schaefer, Woodrow Wilson International Center

This well-attended panel presented three stimulating papers about different aspects of West and East German politics during the Cold War before a receptive audience. It was opened by *Stephen Scala* (University of Maryland-College Park) who reflected on the development and output of what would become a comprehensive system of East German foreign policy expertise by the 1970s. It was decisively shaped by the changing priorities of the ruling SED, which demanded from its experts ideological loyalty but also specialist knowledge and professionalism. This *Spannungsverhältnis* between intellectual subordination and autonomy lent foreign policy expertise in the GDR its own distinct developmental dynamic. It manifested itself directly in the output of East German experts, who constructed a conceptual framework that merged identification of the GDR's concrete geo-strategic interests with ideological precepts drawn from the Marxist-Leninist canon. Within this framework, international relations were understood essentially in ideological terms, and to a significant degree ideology became reality for East German experts. In the 1980s, however, segments of the GDR's foreign policy expert community, prompted by the strains produced by the second Cold War, began to question elements of the established paradigm, including its central tenet asserting the fundamental opposition between capitalism and socialism. Instead of viewing foreign policy as essentially class-based (*Aussenpolitik als Klassenpolitik*), East German experts highlighted more and more the "general human" ("*allgemein menschlich*") character of international relations, within which the GDR increasingly appeared as conducting a "normal" foreign policy. In engendering this change in East German foreign policy thought, however, they did not aim to challenge the SED leadership. While operating within existing constraints, they rather pursued what they saw as being in the best interests of a GDR still viewed as socialist but largely free of inherited dogma.

In his comments, *Bernd Schaefer* (Woodrow Wilson Center) credited Scala's fascinating intellectual history of GDR foreign policy expertise and only wished there would have been more examples based on GDR relations with individual countries or groups of states. He made the strong recommendation to expand the extensive oral history efforts already undertaken by the speaker. Schaefer focused his remarks on two major research questions, namely regarding the GDR's relationship with Soviet Union and the issue of a class-based analysis of foreign policy. Was Moscow's patronage and more or less subtle dominance an internal source of tension within the GDR foreign policy apparatus, i.e. placing "Muscovites" ("*Moskowiter*") versus GDR nationalists? Did internal East German reservations towards USSR policy aspects before Gorbachev's ascent to power result in a payback by Soviet reformists when the GDR was not following Moscow's post-1986 perestroika policy lead, i.e. did pre-Gorbachev assertiveness contribute to the fact that the USSR ultimately left the GDR to its own fate? With regards to late modifications to a class-based (*klassenmaessiges Herangehen*) foreign policy, was it a change emanating from the foreign policy apparatus or rather a reflection of the toned down class rhetoric in GDR domestic context? Is "general human" the opposite perspective to "class-based", or would "pragmatic", "nationalist", or even "non-principled", be more appropriate? Finally Schaefer pleaded to have a closer look to the period of GDR activism and international leadership during the 1970s when supporting Third World revolution to shift the "international correlation of forces". These features were closely tied to the personalities of Werner Lamberz and Paul Markowski and led to discussions among foreign policy experts when ideological exuberance was pitted against skeptical professionalism.

Jean-François Juneau from the University of Montreal described how in 1969 the social-liberal coalition headed by Chancellor Willy Brandt immediately sought to normalize the FRG's relations with the Soviet bloc and how this new Ostpolitik posed a significant challenge to United States foreign policy. Although they welcomed Bonn's willingness to recognize the European status quo, Nixon and Kissinger believed that Brandt's policy of rapprochement with the Soviet Union and its satellites could endanger the unity of the Atlantic Alliance and put their own policy of détente in the context of the Vietnam War at risk. However, by the end of 1970, they came to the conclusion that they could exploit Bonn's new Eastern policy to their advantage. Ostpolitik had created a strong Soviet interest in the conclusion of a Four Power Agreement on Berlin, which Kissinger used as leverage in US-Soviet negotiations on the Vietnam War and arms control.

Thus, in 1971-1972, the Nixon Administration became greatly interested in the success of Brandt's initiatives toward the Soviet bloc.

The commentator emphasized the excellent perceptive analysis of American perspectives and actual realpolitik as delivered by the presenter. Aware of the pitfalls of personalization and simplification, the discussant nonetheless emphasized the unique pattern of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, their difficult personalities, strange political symbiosis and absolute centrality to U.S. decision-making in the period. Their views on Bonn's Ostpolitik contrasted with different dispositions in the State Department, American media, intellectual elites and many in the U.S. Congress. Ultimately they rather acted like two dogs that barked a lot when nobody was around but felt ultimately inhibited to bite when targets were in reach. Washington's intention to maintain good relations with any sitting Bonn government was paramount and led to the avoidance of alienating a vital ally in the overall geo-strategic Cold War context.

With regard to the "sudden change of attitude" by the U.S. in late 1970, as correctly noted by the presenter, the commentator offered the additional explanation of domestic electoral politics. Nixon's Republicans did badly in the 1970 mid-term elections, and it became clear to the President that only foreign policy successes might get him re-elected. In 1971/72 he indeed pulled off summits in Beijing and Moscow, the withdrawal from Vietnam and negotiations with Hanoi that almost came to a close. In this context, the Bonn factor pertaining to the 1971 Berlin Quadripartite Agreement and the 1972 approval of the Eastern Treaties became an important element in Washington's overall relations with Moscow.

The third paper by *Jakub Tyskiewicz* (University of Wrocław) dealt with the German question as one of the major tensions in U.S. - Polish relations after 1956. The first and most important aspect of bilateral discussions was the issue of the recognition of the Oder-Neisse line as Poland's new Western border. Having listened to the arguments of Polish communists, the speaker asserted, the U.S. government dramatically changed its attitude toward that problem from a rigid stressing of "final delimitation in a peace treaty" in 1956/1957 to an almost unofficial support of the Polish position in the 1960s, even in Washington's internal contacts with its West German partners. Although the FRG always remained one of the closest allies of the United States, Americans weighed Polish arguments against Bonn's static policy despite some of the former being simple communist propaganda slogans. The U.S. government also began to actively seek vessels to improve relations and mitigate tensions between Bonn and Warsaw hoping such would have positive effects on the international situation in Europe. A partially new approach of the U.S. government toward the German question was also connected with Washington's hopes of improvements in Polish-West German relations. The latter could become one of the factors gradually allowing Poland to achieve at least "partial independence" within the Warsaw Pact straightjacket in the near future, one of the long-term goals of Washington's policy in Eastern Europe from 1956 onwards.

In his comments, Bernd Schaefer commended the well-researched and balanced paper based on American and Polish archival sources. With regard to German status and border questions Washington always opted for a close alliance with respective West German governments and avoided questioning their positions in public. Yet the Oder-Neisse border issue had certainly mutated with time into one of the few American individual differences from FRG policy positions. Here further research into U.S. sources pertaining to relations with West Germany between 1956 and 1970 might shed light on this American balancing act between public loyalty and internal reservations. Also it might highlight heightened sensitivity and anxiety of Bonn governments. Still, Washington hardly exerted pressure on Bonn and waited with its own official recognition of the Oder-Neisse border until West Germany itself finally agreed to this step in 1990. Under the radar of peculiar German sensitivities, however, Washington's ties with Polish society had developed into close relations - a process started back then when Władysław Gomułka had achieved some limited maneuvering space for his country within the Soviet bloc.

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