

Willy Brandt, My Life in Politics

Caption: In his memoirs, the former German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, describes the relations between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the months preceding the signature of the bilateral basic treaty on 21 December 1972.

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Walter Ulbricht, who had opposed the Soviet urging for better relations with the Federal Republic, had to quit his post at the head of the Socialist Unity Party in May 1971. I never met him, but he was described to me more than once, sometimes by people from the East, as arrogant and overbearing. For all his oddity, however, I was rather impressed by his doggedness, and I thought it to his credit that under his government there had been no show trials with death sentences passed on dissidents, such as there had been in Prague and Budapest. Erich Honecker succeeded Ulbricht, and after the latter's death in the summer of 1973 Honecker also became Chairman of the Council of State.

The Four-Power Agreement on Berlin had to be complemented by agreements between the two German sides. A transit traffic agreement was concluded in December 1971 and a lump-sum payment for road costs was finally made. The Berlin Senate concluded a visiting agreement. Particular importance attached to the transport treaty with the GDR of May 1972, the month in which the Moscow and Warsaw treaties were passed by the Bundestag. Before the prematurely dissolved Bundestag adjourned in September the transport treaty was passed with no votes against and nine abstentions.

The same month, May 1972, Brezhnev and Nixon set their sights on much further-reaching projects. In June the representatives of the Four Powers in Berlin signed their concluding protocol, thus clearing the last hurdles, and the agreement came into force; the Soviets had delayed this last move until it could coincide with the ratification of the treaties. At the end of the year the two German states concluded the Basic Treaty, mostly negotiated by State Secretaries Egon Bahr and Michael Kohl, which ruled on the setting up of permanent missions and eased humanitarian tasks. To many people, this seemed to set the seal on détente in Europe. In the same way as the blockade had once symbolized the Cold War, the ruling on the coexistence of the two German states and the prospects of their future partnership ushered in a new period of post-war European history. That did not mean there would be no sudden chills.

The opposition objected to the fact that - so it had persuaded itself - the negotiations had been 'over-hasty'. Strauss induced the Bavarian State Government to appeal to the Constitutional Court. The Court ruled that the agreement could be reconciled with the Basic Law, though for reasons some of which were surprising.

The two governments had brought the treaty into force on 20 June 1973. The next day, both their applications for membership lay before the Security Council of the United Nations. At the beginning of July the foreign ministers met in Helsinki to get the all-European conference off the ground. The improved visiting opportunities were particularly welcome to the public - and good for national solidarity! Soon, people had taken advantage of them a million times, although mainly in the West-to-East direction.

It is certain that no more than we had achieved *could* have been achieved at the beginning of the seventies. We could not cause the Wall to disappear by magic. A solution for Berlin as a whole had not suggested itself. Would the attempt have been doomed to failure? We could not be sure how German questions would be answered in a process whereby the two halves of Europe were beginning to come together. But I was in no doubt that both German states had a duty to reinforce peace and stability at the heart of Europe. Rendering Europe such a service might be a tardy reparation for the harm that had sprung from German soil. There can be common responsibility even in division, and it no longer seemed impossible to make that division more tolerable.

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