

Willy Brandt, My Life in Politics


Caption: In his memoirs, the former German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, recalls the signature of the German-Polish treaty, on 7 December 1970 in Warsaw, under which both countries recognised, in particular, the inviolability of existing common borders. He also remembers the symbolic importance of his kneeling before the memorial dedicated to the victims from Warsaw's Jewish ghetto.

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[...]

In 1970 and also later, I was asked why I did not give precedence over the treaty with the Soviet Union to the treaty to be concluded with the Poles, who had suffered so unspeakably. This was a purely academic question, and the Polish leaders shared my view. We had no choice; the key to normal relations lay in Moscow. Nor was Russia to be seen only as the seat of power; its own people had suffered terribly as well.

I will concede, though, that the Polish people and their leaders alike would have preferred our declaration on the Oder-Neisse border to be on the agenda in Warsaw first; it seemed worth only half as much as a 'present from Russia'. The leaders, however, knew what the general public could not: a government I headed would be ready to accept the new western frontier of Poland contractually. I had signalled as much during the 1969 election campaign, and thus before it was clear whether I would be able to form the new Government. In 1970 I accepted the Polish proposal to make the establishment of the border the prime concern in the Warsaw Treaty, and let non-aggression follow.

When I was talking to Wladyslaw Gomulka, Polish Communist Party leader and *de facto* head of state, after the signing of the treaty, on the afternoon of 7 December 1970, the problem of the order of precedence surfaced again. Well-meaning Polish journalists had expressed a wish for us to ratify the Warsaw Treaty before the Moscow Treaty. Gomulka asked me not to lose sight of the facts. Any attempt to pry Poland away from its alliance or even drive a wedge between Poland and its great neighbour to the east, he said, was bound to fail. Moreover, the Moscow Treaty had been concluded first; both should be ratified at the same time, or very close together.

[...]

It was a great burden I carried with me to Warsaw. Nowhere had a nation and its people suffered as they did in Poland. The routine extermination of Polish Jews took bloodlust to lengths no one would have thought possible. Who can name all the Jews from Poland, and other parts of Europe, who were annihilated in Auschwitz alone? The memory of six million murder victims lay along my road to Warsaw, and the memory of the fight to the death of the Warsaw ghetto, which I had followed from my observation post in Stockholm, and of which the governments fighting Hitler had taken hardly any more notice than they did of the heroic rising of the Polish capital itself a few months later.

On the morning after my arrival, my Warsaw programme contained two wreath-laying ceremonies, the first at the grave of the Unknown Soldier. There, I remembered the victims of violence and treachery. The screens and newspapers of the world featured a picture that showed me kneeling - before the memorial dedicated to the Jewish ghetto of the city and its dead. I have often been asked what the idea behind that gesture was: had it been planned in advance? No, it had not. My close colleagues were as surprised as the reporters and photographers with me, and as those who did not attend the ceremony because they could see no 'story' in it.

I had not planned anything, but I had left Wilanow Castle, where I was staying, with a feeling that I must express the exceptional significance of the ghetto memorial. From the bottom of the abyss of German history, under the burden of millions of victims of murder, I did what human beings do when speech fails them.

Even twenty years later, I cannot say more than the reporter whose account ran: 'Then he who does not need to kneel knelt, on behalf of all who do need to kneel but do not - because they dare not, or cannot, or cannot dare to kneel.'

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