

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

No. 512

Published on 13 February 2015

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Felix Jack Grenfell Bozek. "Britain, European security and freer movement: the development of Britain's CSCE policy 1969–1972." *Cold War History* 13:4 (November 2013): 439-461. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2012.756870. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.756870>

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR512>

Reviewed by **Angela Romano**, University of Glasgow

The historiography on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) has flourished over the past ten years. Many aspects of the Helsinki Conference have been analysed and the CSCE is now acknowledged among the crucial factors explaining the pace of the fall of communism in Europe.¹ The goals and policy of numerous participating countries have been scrutinised and appraised, and this scholarship has demonstrated that the CSCE was a key instrument in many states' Cold War and European policies. Overall, this CSCE historiography has helped elucidate existing different conceptions of détente, and has revealed the relevant role and increasing activism of actors other than the superpowers within the European scenario, among which the previously overlooked European Economic Community (EEC) and the neutrals feature prominently.² Yet there is room for further historical inquiries into the Helsinki Conference, particularly, though not exclusively, as far as national attitudes and policies are concerned. This is certainly the case of the United Kingdom, which is usually

¹ Daniel Thomas, "Human Rights Ideas, the Demise of Communism, and the End of the Cold War", *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7:2 (2005), 110-41; Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas S. Blanton, "The Moscow Helsinki Group 30th Anniversary: From the Secret File," NSA EBB no. 191, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB191/>; Adam Roberts, "An 'incredibly swift transition': reflections on the end of the Cold War", in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, eds. Melvin Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. III, 513-34; Rosemary Foot, "The Cold War and human rights", in *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. III, 445-65; Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² Angela Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente. How the West Shaped the Helsinki CSCE* (Brussels, Peter Lang, 2009); Thomas Fischer, *Neutral power in the CSCE. The N+N States and the Making of the Helsinki Accords 1975* (Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2009).

“characterised as detached from the CSCE process” (440), and Bozek’s article is therefore a welcome addition to the field.

There is indeed an open debate about British attitudes towards the CSCE. This debate may be confined to a few scholars, but it has proven quite lively. As Bozek accurately reminds us, at one extreme on the spectrum are authors who have described Britain “as doubtful about the CSCE and as a late and reluctant convert to the idea that increased human contact and greater freedom of information across the Iron Curtain would undermine the cohesion of the Eastern bloc” (440); whether arguing in favour of a change of heart or a boost in confidence, they detect British conversion to the cause of promoting the transformation of Europe only in 1974. Moving towards a more positive appraisal is my own view that allies misunderstood British pragmatism, whereas London actually “prompted the West to formulate its counterproposals and to pursue proudly its own project of détente”.³ At the other extreme on the spectrum we find authors who argue that Britain “played a leading role in transforming Soviet proposals for a conference into practical measures for ‘normalising’ relations amongst peoples across the Iron Curtain, and in bringing the CSCE negotiations to an end on satisfactory terms for the West” (440). Bozek clearly takes a halfway position, as he argues that

“on the spectrum of Western attitudes towards the CSCE, (the UK) occupied a moderate position. If British expectations were not high, they nevertheless worked diligently to defend Western unity, secure the propaganda advantage, and gain some small but meaningful concessions to improve the European security landscape, liberalise Eastern Europe, and overcome the Iron Curtain” (461).

In listing the reasons behind the British attitude, Bozek does not add to what other authors have argued. We knew already that the British were concerned about Soviet goals, propaganda losses and gains and their relevance in securing public opinion support for continuing defence efforts, and that they warned allies about the dangers of agreeing to a security conference on Soviet terms. We also knew that the British did not entirely dismiss the call to convene a security conference in order to keep Britain on the détente trend and to “catch up with Paris, Bonn, and Washington” (448). Bozek never claims to be innovative on these points. As clearly stated in the introduction, he intends to explore these questions further by focusing on “how Britain formulated its CSCE policy between the Warsaw Pact’s call for a European security conference in the Budapest Appeal in March 1969 and the opening of the MPT in November 1972” (441).

The analysis of the 1969-1972 period represents a welcome contribution to field, as British CSCE policy in these years had not yet been thoroughly scrutinised. The author offers a more detailed analysis of the discussions and reasoning leading the British government to engage with NATO’s debate on and preparations for the Helsinki Conference. He aptly

³ Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente*, 151

chooses to consider the British CSCE policy in the wider context of British approach to European security matters, and develops his analysis in five chronological sections, i.e. the 1960s up to the Prague Spring, the immediate post-Prague 1968, 1969-1970, 1970-1971, and 1972. Relying on existing literature, published British documents, and archival sources from the UK National Archives, Bozek follows and details to a certain extent the backs and forwards of the British government's thinking about European security, détente's scope and goals, and the opportunity to convene a pan-European conference.

In explaining British swinging, Bozek points to well-known external factors, but has the merit to take a closer look at how key political figures and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials interpreted the changing European scenario and reconsidered the UK's posture in it. Indeed, it is the attention paid to senior political figures that brings Bozek to offer the first significant addition to our knowledge. Martin Brown is right to point at the major role of FCO officials, and especially Crispin Tickell.⁴ Yet this seems to apply more to the actual CSCE negotiations. Bozek reveals that UK Prime Ministers and the Foreign Secretaries did instigate and direct preparation for the multilateral talks. Harold Wilson and Michael Stewart supported the idea of "preparing a 'List of Issues' for possible negotiation with the Eastern bloc" (449). Edward Heath and Alec Douglas-Home more convincingly endorsed the proposal on freer movement, and called the FCO to actively work on it. I greatly enjoyed reading about British disappointment with NATO's "unfit for purpose" studies, as well as Douglas-Home's concerns that "the CSCE would be 'largely a jamboree of propaganda'" (453).

The second important contribution of Bozek's article is backdating the British more proactive stance/actual involvement in the CSCE affair to 1971, i.e. before the Multilateral Preparatory Talks. Bozek shows that the British encouraged their allies to spell out Western values and goals fully, while at the same time made sure that this would not turn into a mere confrontational and counterproductive exercise. In Bozek's words, they transformed "the Warsaw Pact's agenda into the basis for genuine discussions on European security" (449). It is, however, rather surprising to see increasing movement of people, ideas, and information in Europe, and seeking a declaration of principles that would contradict the Brezhnev doctrine listed as British "defensive aims" (453). In fact, the two were the key aspects of Western *offensive* CSCE aims.

Bozek's analysis is also commendable in that it points to "a multi-faceted policy of engagement" consisting "of efforts to improve Anglo-Soviet relations, an optimistic public tone about the prospects for the CSCE, and a firm but uncontroversial manner in setting forth security objectives" (454). As Bozek shows, the new British policy was not limited to

⁴ Martin D. Brown, "A very British vision of Détente: The United Kingdom's foreign policy during the Helsinki process, 1969-1975", in *Overcoming the Iron Curtain: Visions of the End of the Cold War in Europe, 1945-1990*, eds. Frédéric Bozo et al. (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).

propaganda and “presentational technique” (456), it also translated into specific proposals.

As much as I like the article, I cannot overlook some inconsistencies and shortcomings. First, it is a bit odd to find in the pre-1968 section a reference to what Harold Wilson said to Richard Nixon in 1970 about the “potential (...) to influence the top Soviet leadership” (443). This reveals Wilson’s thinking in 1970 and should have therefore been placed in the post-1968 section, where it would have also provided useful evidence on how the Prime Minister came to strengthen his vision of détente. Second, I would have very much appreciated a thorough analysis of FCO’s hope “that Western European integration would discourage Soviet adventurism in Europe and loosen Eastern European states away from the Soviet orbit” (445). This is quite an innovative approach and would have deserved more attention, not least as it seems to have posed dangers of destabilising Europe, and also sounds inconsistent with the choice to not antagonise Moscow.

The major problem I have with Bozek’s article involves NATO communiqués-related aspects. It is quite disappointing that Bozek neither enters into a thorough analysis of NATO discussions nor refers to the existing literature dealing with this aspect in detail. This leads to a narrow and inaccurate appraisal of both the content and the significance of the NATO Ministerial communiqué of May 1970s. Bozek states that

“(w)ith Belgian support against French and American resistance, Britain also secured a statement in the May 1970 communiqué declaring that the allies would be ready to enter multilateral contacts with the purpose of exploring when negotiations could begin, so far as progress was recorded in Bonn’s eastern treaties talks with Moscow and Warsaw, as well as in the Four Power talks on Berlin.” (449).

First, NATO being an alliance of fifteen, it would have been useful to know where the other members stood on the issue; evidently, there must have been either stronger support for the British proposal than just that of Belgium or a quite persuasive action from the UK and Belgian representatives to gain other members to their cause. As a matter of fact, in March 1969 some West European governments had voiced sympathy for the idea of a CSCE, e.g. Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) Foreign Minister Willy Brandt to the press; Italian Foreign Minister Pietro Nenni before the WEU Assembly. There is also evidence that after April 1969 the Italian government invited NATO members to follow a common action plan and advocated Western initiatives and proposals for the conference agenda.⁵ Second, and far more important, by failing to compare the content of the May 1970 communiqué with the previous December 1969 Declaration, Bozek does not show how the former represented a British achievement in “pushing the alliance towards a positive public posture on multilateral discussions.” (449). In fact, the NATO Declaration of December 1969 had affirmed that the conference was a feasible option in

⁵ Romano, *From Détente to Europe*, 71-73.

the general East-West dialogue and had also set some preliminary conditions to its convocation: a positive conclusion of the FRG Ostpolitik treaties with the USSR and Poland, a quadripartite agreement on Berlin, an agreement to open MBFR negotiations, and a positive development in inner-German talks.⁶ These preconditions were reiterated in the following NATO communiqué. It is true that the meeting in Rome debated the possibility of moving to the multilateral exploratory phase, but ministers decided to wait until sound signs had come of Soviet willingness to negotiate concrete improvements in Europe and meet NATO preconditions.⁷

Finally, there is a major flaw in Bozek's use of the December 1970 NATO meeting to sustain the idea that the new Tory government adopted a more cautious attitude at first. The author tells us that

“(a)t NATO's December ministerial meeting in 1970, Douglas-Home set out to highlight the need to be cautious in responding to proposals for a conference, and to argue that NATO's acceptance of multilateral preparatory contacts should be preceded by the conclusion of the Berlin talks and Bonn's eastern treaties” (451)

But how is this different from the previously mentioned Communiqué of May 1970, the wording of which he claims had been a British achievement? If, otherwise, Bozek intended to suggest that Douglas-Home reined in allies who wished to lift the preconditions, he should have let us know about it.

Apart from these weaknesses, Bozek's appraisal of British achievements is a fairly accurate and balanced one. The author fully acknowledges that some British proposals failed to gain the allies' support. He also concedes that the British commitment did remain far from enthusiastic and also highly sceptical about the possible outcomes. Yet there are intermediate stages between an enthusiastic approach and a lack of genuine enthusiasm for the process, and Bozek convincingly argues that “within internal British discourse there coexisted both scepticism about the results of the conference and also a positive line on the substance of negotiations” (460). In other words, the British did think it unlikely that the CSCE could achieve results, but they came to think that it was worth trying, and trying properly. Still, I would have liked to read a more straightforward conclusion on what exactly made the British actively involved in the CSCE exercise. Was it damage limitation practice, pragmatism, a need to jump on the bandwagon with EEC soon-to-be partners, or genuine belief in Western (European) détente strategy? The debate may well continue.

⁶ *Declaration of the North Atlantic Council*, Brussels, 5 December 1969, especially parr. 13 and 14. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_26760.htm

⁷ *NATO Final Communiqué*, Rome, 26-27 May 1970, especially par. 15. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-AEgFAoEA-C9E2D744/natolive/official_texts_26789.htm

H-Diplo Article Review

Dr. Angela Romano is Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow. Her main research interests include Cold War, integration processes in Europe, the CSCE process, and transatlantic relations. She is currently working at her second monograph, *The European Community and Eastern Europe in the Cold War*, which will be published in Routledge's Cold War Series in 2015. Among her most recent publications, "Untying Cold War knots: The European Community and Eastern Europe in the long 1970s", *Cold War History* 14:2 (2014), and "G-7s, European Councils and East-West Economic Relations, 1975-1982", in E. Mourlon-Druol and F. Romero (eds.), *International Summitry and Global Governance. The Rise of the G-7 and the European Council, 1974-1991* (London: Routledge 2014).

© 2015 The Author.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/).