

# Germany, East and West

The Soviet-West German talks in Moscow on a treaty to renounce the use of force could provide a breakthrough for European security. That the talks are taking place at all is important. The history of East-West relations in post-war Europe has in a very general sense been the story of countless rival proposals from either the West or Moscow being rejected alternately. With few exceptions—like the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963—both sides have never been conciliatory simultaneously. When one side blew hot, the other was cold and vice versa. If both sides are now ready to talk about a treaty, this is a major step forward.

Inevitably some suspicions have been aroused. The West German opposition in particular has lately been making a tremendous hue and cry about Herr Brandt's Ostpolitik. They accuse him of "selling out" to the Kremlin. Quite apart from the fact that Herr Brandt as an ex-mayor of West Berlin understands West Germany's security needs better than most people, this approach by the CDU/CSU is needlessly narrow. There are certain issues on which both Moscow and Western Europe have a common interest. It is not a question that one side's gain is the other's loss. One of these is a reduction of tension, and a lessening of mistrust. The mutual suspicions of Russia for Germany and vice versa are one of Europe's oldest problems. Any formal move to overcome them are of great psychological significance.

More tangibly the Ostpolitik raises three other issues: the status of Berlin, the geography of Poland's Western frontier, and the position of East Germany. Of these three, Berlin is the odd one out, because on the question of Berlin what the Russians want is a change in the status quo. On the other two they want a recognition of the status quo. It is an important distinction. On Berlin the West should not, and indeed will not, offer any change of policy. The current four-Power talks in Berlin may offer some minor bargaining points. A Western agreement not to emphasise the "West German-ness" of West Berlin by having sessions of the West German Parliament in the city might be given in exchange for better access. But this is a reversible decision. If the Russians or the East Germans harass traffic again, the Allies will treat that as an annulment of the agreement. The Russians could not expect anything else.

The other two issues are different. For one thing they are to all intents and purposes irreversible. Recognition of frontiers cannot so easily be abrogated. This explains the diplomatic caution about changing policy. On the other hand recognising the Oder-Neisse line or the frontier between East and West Germany is not technically

a substantive issue. It is one of symbolism. It is not a question of "delivering people into the hands of communism" as a change of status in Berlin would be. The East Germans and Poles are there already, and neither Bonn nor the West can do anything about it without unleashing a suicidal war. This is the main reason why almost half the West German population, and more than half of its young people, are now prepared to say the frontiers should be recognised, as indeed they should be.

Herr Brandt's Government has stopped short of recognising East Germany on the grounds that the recognition issue is a useful bargaining counter in his talks with Eastern Europe. These are understandable tactics. It can certainly be argued that by holding out here he has obtained some softening-up from Moscow and Warsaw. Both have dropped their demands that recognition of East Germany must be a precondition for any treaty-signing with them. They have even persuaded Herr Ulbricht to drop it as a precondition for talks with Bonn. But what this shows mainly is that both Warsaw and Moscow are more keen on coming to terms with Bonn than in letting Herr Ulbricht have a veto. It does not give any clue to Herr Ulbricht's own position.

The basic conundrum about any recognition by Bonn of East Germany is this. Will it mean the East German Government will be tougher or more liberal with its people? Will it make it harder for East Germans who want to visit their families in the West or not? To this question there is no definite answer. All one can say is that the balance of probabilities is that it will not make any difference at all. For the past twenty years East Germany has developed internally under its own momentum, regardless of anything the West has tried to do. The stronger East Germany becomes economically, the more self-confidence its regime acquires (and these are the trends today) the more this will be true. Alternatively, it is just possible that recognition might make things better. Certainly on travel between the two German states and across Berlin things could not be worse. They can only improve, or stay the same.

West Germany argues that by recognising the East as a sovereign state, reunification or the so-called German option is put off for ever. But is this so? There may be few historical precedents for it but nothing prevents two sovereign states merging politically if they want to at some future date. Indeed the history of Germany itself in the nineteenth century is the history of independent sovereign states deciding to unify. If the logic of history in the long run is that Germany will one day be reunited, the logic of today is that each German state should recognise the other, and agree to differ.