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GHI (German Historical Institute) Conference Report

Nuclear Armament, Peace Movements, and the Second Cold War: The 1979 NATO Double Track Decision in German-German and International Perspective

(Zweiter Kalter Krieg und Friedensbewegung: Der NATO-Doppelbeschluss in deutsch-deutscher und internationaler Perspektive)

26-28 March 2009

Conference at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin

Sponsored by the GHI and the Institute for Contemporary History Munich-Berlin

Conveners: Philipp Gassert (GHI), Tim Geiger (IfZ), Hermann Wentker (IfZ)

Participants: Helmut Altrichter (Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg), Friedhelm Boll (Universität Kassel), Coreline Boot, Eckart Conze (Universität Marburg), Jost Dülffer (Universität Köln), Philipp Gassert (GHI), Tim Geiger (IfZ München-Berlin), Beatrice de Graaf (Universiteit Leiden), Ronald Granieri (University of Pennsylvania), Helga Haftendorn (Freie Universität Berlin), Anja Hanisch (IfZ München-Berlin), Jan Hansen (Berlin), Helge Heidemeyer (BStU Berlin), Jeffrey Herf (University of Maryland, College Park), Beatrice Heuser (University of Reading), Detlef Junker (University of Heidelberg), Martin Klimke (GHI), Mark Kramer (Harvard University), Ursula Lehmkuhl (Freie Universität Berlin), Wilfried Mausbach (Universität Heidelberg), Horst Möller (IfZ München-Berlin), Beate Neuss (Universität Chemnitz), Leopoldo Nuti (Università Roma Tre), Michael Ploetz (IfZ München-Berlin), Detlef Pollack (Universität Münster), Andreas Rödder (Universität Mainz), Joachim Scholtyseck (Universität Bonn), Klaus Schwabe (RWTH Aachen), Hans-Peter Schwarz (Universität Bonn), Hans-Georges-Henri Soutou (Sorbonne), Kristan Stoddart (University of Southampton), Hermann Wentker (IfZ München-Berlin), Gerhard Wettig (Kommen)

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reports/PDF/GHI-NATO-DoubleTrack-Report.pdf>

In this year's marathon of commemorations, an important milestone in the Cold War unjustly gets overlooked: the NATO Double-Track Decision of December 12, 1979. On that date, NATO decided that in case arms control negotiations with the USSR should fail, the intermediate nuclear forces of the West would be modernized to provide a counterweight to the new Soviet SS-20 missiles. This directly affected international relations as well as domestic developments in European and North American societies. Protests against nuclear armament manifested themselves on a scale hitherto unseen. Protesters organized human chains, sit-ins, and mass demonstrations that ran into the hundreds of thousands. But east of the "Iron Curtain," as well, the idea of peace moved people.

This conference used the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Double-Track Decision to take a fresh look at the heated debates of the 1970s and 1980s, which can now be explored with the methods of contemporary history. Based on newly available archival source material and in exchange with contemporary eyewitnesses (several of whom were featured discussants at the conference, while others made their voices heard during the conference's question and answer sessions), historians and political scientists from France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States asked to what extent these late Cold War controversies marked a turning point in the history of the post-World War II period. Also, participants asked what the contribution of the controversies over nuclear armament to the overcoming of the East-West conflict had been. Finally, participants explored the not-so-trivial question of what the extraordinary political mobilization of the late 1970s and 1980s tells us about the concerned societies and cultures. As co-convenor Philipp Gassert (GHI) stressed in his opening remarks, the fact that millions were taking to the streets in the early 1980s demands an explanation. Why could the nightmare scenario of a "nuclear Holocaust" grip the human imagination in the early 1980s whereas today barely anyone bothers?

The first panel, chaired by Detlef Junker, focused on the political decision making-processes on the super power level. Michael Ploetz placed the role of nuclear weapons in the long-term context of the Cold War's ups and downs. According to Ploetz, the Soviet Union's decision to modernize its intermediate nuclear arms force by stationing SS-20s aimed at revolutionizing diplomatic relations between the two antagonistic blocks. Ploetz also highlighted the fact that it was under Carter and not under Reagan that the United States started to move swiftly away from détente. Klaus Schwabe then carefully traced the Reagan administration's paradoxical stance on the issues. Reagan, who came into office as a Cold War hawk and was a lukewarm supporter of the Geneva armament reduction talks, changed course during his second administration. He realized that the United States had a massive credibility problem and was losing ground with its NATO allies. According to Gerhard Wettig, the Soviet Union did not share the basic premises of the West that deterrence should prevent a nuclear war. Rather, its strategy aimed at placing the Soviet Union in a position in which she could survive nuclear war. Wettig also stressed the Soviet world view, in which the West was necessarily aggressive.

A roundtable discussion, chaired by Horst Möller, then reflected these hotly debated questions through the eyes of contemporary decision makers. Its participants were Hans-

Dietrich Genscher, the former Federal Foreign Minister; Karsten Voigt, the current coordinator for German-American cooperation and a spokesperson on foreign affairs for the SPD faction in the

Bundestag at that time; Rainer Eppelmann, a reverend "moved by peace" in East Berlin and the last minister of defense and for disarmament of the GDR; and Antje Vollmer, a former member of the West German peace movement, a member of the first group of Green Party Bundestag deputies, and a former vice president of the Bundestag. Whereas Genscher stressed the key role of West Germany for the double track decision and portrayed Helmut Schmidt as his "hero", Voigt underscored the relative lack of importance of foreign policy issues within the SPD -- even when in government. At the same time he gave an impression of the sophisticated foreign policy debates that were going among the experts. Vollmer for her part explained the opposition of the peace movement as being based on a sense of responsibility gleaned from history and Germany's responsibility for the crimes of World War II. Finally, Reiner Eppelmann highlighted the relative isolation of the GDR peace movement, which very much reacted to domestic political concerns.

The first half of the following day was devoted to the domestic politics of the two German states. Tim Geiger's presentation of the Schmidt-Genscher government placed Schmidt's famous 1977 London address into the long-term context of continued German anxieties over German dependence on U.S. nuclear deterrents. He also stressed that during the armament controversy the Federal Republic fully developed its leadership role within the Western alliance. Andreas Roedder then discussed the politics of the Kohl-Genscher government, with Kohl placing West German loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance at the top of his agenda. As Roedder argued, domestic politics fell in line with international developments, yet the debate also showed that it would have been difficult to repeat that show of strength, when during the end of the decade the issue of short term nuclear missiles came up. The paper by Friedhelm Boll, with the assistance of Jan Hansen, then explored the inner-party dynamics within the SPD. As Boll argued, the main motives of those within the SPD who dissented from Schmidt's increasingly marginalized line were the inner cohesion of the party and efforts to re-integrate those who had been lost to the new social movements during the 1970s. Hermann Wentker presented a paper that looked at the role of the GDR, whose foreign policy priorities considerably changed within the context of the rearmament debate. Because the GDR was dependent on West German economic support, the East German leadership tried to steer a delicate course between an ostentative assertion of solidarity with the Soviet Union, while at the same time pursuing a course of improved relations with Bonn.

The first afternoon section then turned from "established politics" to the "anti-establishment" policies of the peace movement in East and West. Moderated by Ursula Lehmkuhl, the first panel explored the transnational nature of peace movements. Martin Klimke demonstrated the close nexus between activists on both sides of the Atlantic (highlighted by the biographies of Petra Kelly and Randall Forsberg) as well as the pan-European interactions. He stressed mutual interests, transatlantic personal and institutional networks as well as similarities in the cultural coping mechanisms of a perceived nuclear Armageddon (which was often communicated through popular culture

and movies such as “The Day After” (1983) or Nena’s international hit single “99 Red Balloons” (1983/84)). Helge Heidemeyer drew a balance sheet of the mixed results of East German efforts to influence the West German peace movement. As Heidemeyer concluded, propagandistic efforts of the GDR could only be successful where they fell on fertile ground that had already been prepared by concerns within Western societies. Finally, Detlef Pollack looked at the GDR peace groups “between church and state”. While they did not conform to a Western definition of new social movements, they voiced common grievances in East German society. East German activists could in part rely on West German models and felt legitimized by the peace movements of the West.

The social consequences were the focus of the last panel of the second day, which was chaired by Ronald Granieri. Philipp Gassert placed the debate about nuclear armament within the context of the contemporary discourse on the “crisis of democracy.” As Gassert argued, the impact of the nuclear debate stretched well beyond the immediate political results. It was a vehicle for discussing much more profound issues in Western societies. Anja Harnisch explained the East German peace movement in its social and political context, while Wilfried Mausbach sketched the structures of the US peace movement, its political strategy, and discussed its impact on Reagan’s “Janus face”-like policies. As Mausbach concluded, Reagan was in sync with the peace movement because he abhorred nuclear weapons, too, although he certainly was a protagonist of a strong defense and an ardent anti-Communist too. The panel thus showed that simple oppositions of an establishment prone to nuclear armament and an anti-establishment bent on pursuing “peace” at any price, do not do justice to a highly complicated historical record.

The final panel looked at debates in various European countries. Georges-Henri Soutou explained the paradoxical French policies, with France being in favor of a continued German integration into NATO, while at the same time not being too much concerned about Soviet intermediate nuclear forces. Soutou also showed that the famous friendship between Schmidt and

Giscard was marred by rivalries between the two leaders (with Giscard claiming to be the real father of the double-track decision). Coreline Boot then read a paper by Beatrice de Graaf, who dealt with the Netherlands as the one country where the stationing of Western nuclear weapons was never completed. Yet despite these frequent bouts of “Hollanditis”, the Dutch never gave up their strong Atlanticist orientation. Leopoldo Nuti¹’s paper (read by Hermann Wentker) explained the Italian decision to offer its soil for the stationing of nuclear missiles as the result of a complicated process of interlocking domestic and foreign concerns. The final paper by Beatrice Heuser and Kristan Stoddard offered an “alternative master narrative.” According to Heuser, the threat perceptions of East and West were never compatible and a catastrophic misunderstanding could have been very likely because the West had a completely different understanding of nuclear warfare than the East. Heuser’s paper closed with the harrowing sounds of the title music of the movie “When the Wind Blows” (1986).

The concluding discussion was chaired by Hans-Peter Schwarz and focused on the connection between diplomacy and society and the overall impact and importance of the

double track decision. Helga Haftendorn stressed again the role of Chancellor Schmidt and the crucial steps that had been taken by Carter even before Reagan came along. Helmut Altrichter highlighted the Soviet perception of a West in crisis during the 1970s and discussed the Soviet leadership crisis during the 1980s. Eckart Conze argued that the simple question whether the NATO double track decision had been a success or not gave short shrift to the larger social and cultural context, in which the fears of nuclear Armageddon developed. Otherwise the power of the peace movement could not be explained. Jost Dülffer reminded the audience what “an absurd age” the global Cold War had been, with whole disciplines devoted to making sense of a highly complicated gamble. Dülffer also asked how we can account for the enormous cost of the nuclear arms race. Jeffrey Herf underscored the asymmetric nature of the interaction between East and West over the nuclear armament issue. While the Soviet Union did not have to worry about a domestic public, it could try to exploit the open societies of the West to its own advantage. To him, the double track decision was the most decisive step toward ending the Cold War.

The Berlin conference was memorable for the lively and stimulating exchanges among participants and the audience, which in part was made up of contemporary eyewitnesses. As the first meeting devoted to the historicization of the NATO double track decision, it helped to jumpstart a network of interdisciplinary and crossnational historiographical exchange about the issues concerned, which can be further explored in a webpage that the German Historical Institute has recently set up (www.nuclearcrisis.org).

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