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Introduction

TO THE HELSINKI STATION

At 2:30 p.m. on July 29, 1975, Leonid Brezhnev stepped off a train onto the platform of Helsinki's central station. Sixteen gleaming green cars, pulled by two red engines, had brought the Soviet leader and a clutch of senior officials on an overnight journey from Moscow to the concluding session of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Under a hot sun, Finland's long-serving president, Urho Kekkonen, stood waiting to receive them. Brezhnev embraced his host in a bear hug. As patrolmen kept watch on the station roof and a police helicopter buzzed overhead, the two men walked down the platform surrounded by advisors and bodyguards. Outside the station, Brezhnev greeted a delegation of young Finnish communists sporting red scarves and bearing bouquets of gladioli. After waving to the crowd, he sped off in a black limousine bound for the Soviet embassy, where a grand apartment had been renovated for his three-day visit, decorated with paintings from Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery.¹

The CSCE had originally been a Soviet idea, and Brezhnev had staked his reputation on its success. He had suffered a stroke a few months earlier and his personal physician worried that this trip would overtax his health, but he refused to be deterred. He insisted on taking his place alongside the thirty-four other leaders from Europe and North America who were gathering for this "star-studded summit spectacular," as one journalist described it.² After three days of speeches and scores of bilateral meetings, they would sign the CSCE's capstone agreement: the Helsinki Final Act. The 22,000-word text covered nearly every facet of international life, including the nature of states' borders, military security, the relationship between sovereignty and human rights, trade and economic cooperation, and the circulation of people and information. Commenting on the inscrutability of its prose, a diplomat said, "You are not supposed to understand it. Neither do we, and, what's more, we meant it that way."³ Nonetheless, the agreement was a masterpiece of "diplomatic engineering," one observer wrote. "The silences and

circumlocutions are often as significant as the clearer statements. Were it a modern novel by someone like Nabokov its labyrinths would be explored with delight by literary critics.”⁴

The Final Act had consumed almost three years of constant work. At the preparatory talks in Helsinki from 1972 to 1973, then at the CSCE’s formal negotiations in Geneva from 1973 to 1975, hundreds of diplomats produced almost ten million pages of drafts, declarations, proposals, and counterproposals during meetings that stretched on for thousands of hours.⁵ The conference lasted so long that it acquired a life of its own. The delegates—almost all of them men—ate and drank together, danced at nightclubs, organized basketball tournaments, composed mournful poetry, and drafted satirical reports to pass the time. Some of them fell in love with the interpreters and conference staff, leading to several marriages and uncounted extramarital affairs.⁶ “It wasn’t so much a conference but a way of life,” one diplomat told a reporter. “I felt at times as if I had boarded a ship that had gone adrift or that I was in a time warp.”⁷

The Helsinki summit capped the most ambitious undertaking of an era of ambitious diplomacy. Over the preceding years, the world’s leading powers had launched negotiations across a wide range of subjects, including nuclear arms control, conventional disarmament, the international monetary system, tariffs, the global oil market, and the Law of the Sea. By the summer of 1975, some of these efforts had borne fruit, some had failed, and some continued to grind away. Nothing symbolized the improvement in superpower relations better than the joint Apollo-Soyuz space flight that July, when an American astronaut and Soviet cosmonaut shook hands in orbit.⁸

Nevertheless, those who doubted the possibility of East-West reconciliation could find ample evidence to justify their pessimism. After the fall of Portugal’s dictatorship in 1974, Western observers worried that communists might seize power both in Lisbon and in the country’s newly independent African colonies. When Angola descended into civil war in 1975, the Americans and Soviets sent aid to opposing factions in an attempt to sway the outcome. The same year, North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon, sweeping away the 1973 Paris Peace Accords and the vestiges of American influence in the country. Meanwhile, surging unemployment, inflation, and energy prices shook the self-confidence of the Western economies, which had fallen into their worst slump since the Great Depression. These developments blighted the sunniest prognoses about global politics, but from the vantage point of the Finnish capital, they could not detract from the magnitude of the CSCE’s achievement.

The scale and scope of the conference had no precedent in the Cold War. Participants and observers reached for historical analogies to make sense of its concluding summit. The world had seen nothing like it since the funeral

of King Edward VII in 1910, one journalist remarked, when “nine reigning monarchs, five heirs apparent, seven queens, one archduke and 39 other royal highnesses, an American ex-President,” and hundreds of other dignitaries gathered in London. Sixty-five years later, the panoply in Helsinki included eight presidents, eighteen prime ministers, six communist party leaders, two dozen foreign ministers, an Orthodox archbishop, and an archbishop of the Catholic Church.⁹ King Edward’s obsequies had marked the end of a long era of peace, but many of those at the CSCE hoped that their meeting would “begin, and not conclude, a relatively golden age.”¹⁰

The participants were so numerous that the Finnish government had to dispense with the honor guard that traditionally welcomed foreign heads of state. Even this abbreviated diplomatic protocol required Kekkonen to spend nearly twelve hours greeting the visitors. Because the Soviets were the only delegation to come by train, the president needed a helicopter to dash from the airport to the station and back again in time to receive United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim. The tight logistics sometimes required the mighty to make way for the humble. American president Gerald Ford, aboard Air Force One, had to circle the city for a quarter-hour to give Luxembourg’s tiny delegation time to disembark.¹¹

The Finns spared no effort for their moment in the global spotlight. Five thousand soldiers and police officers patrolled the city, some of whom had been brought in from the distant reaches of the country because Helsinki’s municipal force could not cope on its own. Along the route from the airport to the city center, camouflaged troops with fixed bayonets manned tanks and armored personnel carriers. Antiaircraft batteries and fighter jets kept a lookout for hostile aircraft.¹² The city’s main thoroughfare, Mannerheimintie, was closed to traffic, and some streetcars were rerouted for security reasons.¹³ “As part of a general campaign to present Helsinki in a proper light,” a reporter noted, the local “drunks . . . have been carted off the central streets and taken to the suburbs to dry out.”¹⁴ A few shops put portraits of the visiting statesmen in their windows, and the Stockmann department store offered commemorative T-shirts for sale. The clothes had been made in China, whose government bitterly denounced the conference as a super-power conspiracy to dominate Europe, but the CSCE initials had been added in Finland. “I hope China doesn’t find out what we do to their shirts because I don’t think they would be very happy,” a store clerk said.¹⁵

The conference staff carried an enormous administrative burden. They prepared 5,500 color-coded badges, each bearing a Polaroid portrait, for delegates, journalists, and security personnel. They recruited more than 200 linguists to provide simultaneous interpretation in the CSCE’s six official languages. For the 1,200 journalists covering the event, they assembled hundreds of ashtrays, mountains of copy paper, and scores of typewriters (with both Roman and Cyrillic keyboards), and installed 120 new

telegraph lines to carry reports to the outside world.¹⁶ Because hotel rooms were in short supply, the Finnish Travel Bureau transformed a local Red Cross blood transfusion center into temporary accommodations. Two ocean liners docked in Helsinki harbor to provide additional beds, one reserved for the exclusive use of Soviet personnel.¹⁷

At the center of the action stood Finlandia Hall, the modernist concert hall and conference center that was hosting the summit. Sitting in a park on Töölö Bay, the white-marble building had opened three and a half years previously. Bomb-sniffing dogs padded along its corridors, checking every light fixture and every piece of furniture, and a chain-link fence around the perimeter held curious passersby at bay. Locals who wanted to witness the proceedings had to watch them on television.¹⁸

The Finns expected the event to go down in history as a latter-day Paris Peace Conference or Congress of Vienna, not least because it was the first pan-European summit since the end of the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁹ Others were not so sure. The summit “will bear about as much resemblance to the Congress of Vienna as a chamber of commerce luncheon to a costume ball,” one journalist wrote.²⁰ The congress had been “a much better show” than this summit, another said. The negotiations in Vienna featured dancing, drinking, and all manner of diplomatic and romantic intrigue. By contrast, “no one will be waltzing in Helsinki, at least in public. They will be waiting for handouts, or storming buffet tables, or looking forward to a comfortable hotel room at their next destination.”²¹

The skeptics were only half right. The Congress of Vienna had remade Europe and built a new international order on the wreckage of a generation of warfare. The statesmen in the Austrian capital redrew borders, shifted millions of people from the sovereignty of one ruler to that of another, approved the restoration of the French monarchy, and established a multilateral congress system to preserve great power comity. Perhaps because the CSCE did nothing so dramatic—and lacked Vienna’s aristocratic glamor—few people in 1975 appreciated its full significance. However, the ensuing years would demonstrate that the Final Act was just as consequential for Europe’s international system as the handiwork of Viscount Castlereagh and Prince Metternich had been more than a century and a half earlier.

I

This book is an international history of the Final Act. It addresses three main questions: Why was the CSCE created in the first place? Why did the Final Act take the shape that it did? And how did it influence the Cold War? Any historian who grapples with this subject faces several difficulties. The

first is the sheer number of countries involved, each with its own ambitions and anxieties. Some of the thirty-five participants influenced the conference more than others, but no one dominated it, and although the negotiations often pitted the Eastern allies against their Western counterparts, neither group was monolithic. The arguments within each bloc could be as consequential as those between them, to say nothing of the arguments within each government. Besides, thirteen of the delegations belonged to neither alliance. In some cases they tried to mediate between East and West, while in others they pursued their own independent goals.

Because so many diplomats crowded the negotiations, and because their deliberations lasted so long, the conference left an enormous paper trail. The archives of the participating governments house tens of thousands of documents on the subject, written in nearly two dozen languages. Even if one discounted the challenge of reading this sprawling corpus, there would remain the task of reconstructing and interpreting the course of the negotiations, which officials variously described as “Talmudic,” “Kantian,” and “scholastic” in their complexity.²² In recent years, historians have begun to assemble pieces of the puzzle. The new wave of scholarship has produced detailed studies of the CSCE, most of which examine the contributions of individual states or trace particular themes.²³ This book takes a different approach. Instead of focusing on one country or one side, it examines the conference in the round. Only by looking at the CSCE through the eyes of all of its leading participants, and setting it in its wider international context, can one grasp how the Final Act came into existence.

A number of myths have clung to the agreement since 1975. Some accounts of the Final Act present it as a *quid pro quo*, in which the West agreed to ratify the continent’s postwar frontiers and accept the USSR’s domination of its Eastern European neighbors in exchange for Soviet concessions on human rights.²⁴ In truth, on the question of Europe’s frontiers and the status of Eastern Europe, the Western allies gave nothing away. Far from satisfying Brezhnev’s hope of freezing the political and territorial status quo, the agreement made clear that borders could change, as could alliances, and it repudiated the Brezhnev Doctrine. The result was not a balanced tradeoff between the USSR’s goals and those of its Western peers. On every significant point, the West prevailed. To be sure, the Final Act stood little chance of remaking the Soviet bloc in the short term, but the Western negotiators did not expect immediate results. Instead, they believed that they were sowing the seeds for long-term change by eroding the Soviet bloc’s conceptual footings. For this reason, the agreement constituted a “monumental act of weakness” for the USSR, as KGB officer Nikolai Leonov later wrote.²⁵

Assessments of the Final Act’s significance also tend to stress its provisions on human rights, sometimes to the exclusion of its other contents.²⁶

To suggest that respect for human rights stood at the heart of the agreement says both too much and too little. It says too much because, unlike the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Final Act did not emphasize human rights in their entirety. Although it endorsed the general notion of universal rights, it remained silent about the rights to work, education, and leisure, among others. Instead, it focused on a particular subset of liberties that Western governments held dear, especially the freedom to travel, freedom of information, and freedom of the press. The NATO allies championed these ideas because they reflected core liberal democratic values and because they threatened the mechanisms on which the communist governments relied to control their societies.

This story illuminates the politics of human rights in a decisive period. It demonstrates that the rights revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was driven not just by grassroots mobilization, but by high politics too. Although activists performed a critical function in returning human rights to the top of the international agenda, Western diplomats also made a vital contribution to this process at an early stage—and well before Jimmy Carter entered the White House. For the officials who took the lead in this drama, human rights provided a weapon for fighting the Cold War, not an escape from it. At the CSCE, they stressed those rights that served their purposes, and they always understood them as part of a larger design to put pressure on the Soviets and reaffirm the moral superiority of liberal democracy. Besides, in trying to lower the barriers between states, these freedoms had as much to do with the logic of globalization and European integration as with the concepts that had shaped the Universal Declaration three decades earlier. In this way, the CSCE truncated the meaning of human rights, focusing on those negative liberties that helped the Western cause and marginalizing the rest.²⁷

Treating the Final Act simply as an agreement about human rights, however, ignores its full significance. In response to the upheaval of the 1960s, the CSCE's participants wanted to open new avenues for cooperation and to articulate a code of conduct that they could all accept, East and West alike. However, communist and liberal democratic views on these subjects diverged dramatically, and although leaders on both sides genuinely wanted peace, they defined it in different ways. The result was a fight over the constitutive principles of international order and legitimacy: these were the real stakes at the CSCE. The Final Act therefore represented something far more ambitious than a declaration on human rights. Beneath its tangles of clauses and thickets of commas lay a sweeping vision of how governments should relate to each other and to their citizens in East and West alike.

The CSCE promulgated a common concept of legitimacy for all of Europe. By pledging to uphold the same standards and follow the same rules, regardless of their system of government, the Final Act's signatories laid the

groundwork for a new international order on the continent, much as their predecessors had done at Westphalia in 1648, Utrecht in 1713, Vienna in 1815, and Paris in 1919. Even when superpower tensions returned to dangerous heights in the years after 1975, the agreement remained a touchstone in both East and West. Politicians and average citizens drew inspiration from its provisions, which accelerated the unraveling of the Soviet empire. The terms on which the Cold War ended came directly from its pages. Although it took more than a decade to make its full effects felt, the Final Act served the same purpose as the agreements negotiated at the grand diplomatic conferences of the past, and it influenced the direction of European affairs just as decisively. It deserves to be recognized as their Cold War-era successor.²⁸

II

Historians have described the Cold War as a conflict between rival superpowers, rival ideologies, and rival empires. It was also a conflict between rival international orders and rival concepts of legitimacy. By contrast with earlier apocalyptic wars, the Second World War ended without a peace conference to put the broken state system back together. Because the victorious powers could not agree on a single set of rules to govern the postwar world, two parallel international orders took shape after 1945. In the East, the Soviet Union built an order on the principles of ideological conformity, deference to Moscow, and political and economic centralization. In the West, an American-led order emerged, based on the principles of pluralism, compromise, and openness in both politics and economics. The rift between the two orders fueled the Cold War and ensured that the conflict would endure until they were knit back together.

After bringing the world to the brink of destruction in the 1950s and early 1960s, the two orders reached an uneasy equilibrium. Premised on the theory of mutually assured destruction, it averted catastrophe but fell short of genuine peace. As the danger of war receded, however, the principles of legitimacy on which the orders relied came under attack. In the East, the familiar claims about Western revanchism—which the Soviet government used to justify domestic repression and claim its citizens' loyalty—wore thin. The Sino-Soviet split threatened the USSR's political and ideological primacy, as did the growing assertiveness of Eastern European leaders. Intellectuals and young people lost faith in Marxist-Leninist ideals and expressed their discontent in daring new ways. Economic growth rates sagged, and the gap between Eastern and Western living standards widened.

To the West, NATO's relevance seemed to fade along with the threat of war. On both sides of the Atlantic, calls to cut military spending grew

louder, and students rebelled against a status quo that they found suffocating. In Western Europe, officials and citizens alike questioned Washington's leadership, especially in light of the Vietnam War. As the postwar economic boom fizzled out, the United States clashed with its European and Japanese partners over tariffs, subsidies, and monetary policy. The long postwar era came an end, but no one could tell what would follow it. As British analyst Alastair Buchan pointed out, "The problems created by the continued existence of two quite antithetical conceptions of domestic and world order . . . have not in any sense been solved."²⁹

Leaders in both blocs grasped these dangers, but they responded in different ways. The Soviets and Americans developed conservative strategies that aimed to stabilize the Cold War. In Moscow, Brezhnev and his foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, pursued agreements with the West to ratify Europe's postwar status quo and increase the USSR's access to foreign capital and technology. By replacing the exhausted ideals of communism with the new ideals of peace and prosperity, they reasoned, the Soviet government could reclaim its citizens' loyalty. In Washington, President Richard Nixon and national security advisor Henry Kissinger cut America's military commitments to alleviate the political and fiscal costs of international leadership. Meanwhile, they reestablished relations with Beijing to expand the United States' room for maneuver, and encouraged the USSR to behave like a satisfied, rather than a revisionist, power.

By contrast, Western Europe's leading statesmen pursued transformative strategies that sought to overcome the Cold War, not to entrench it. French President Georges Pompidou wanted to expand contacts between governments and individuals on either side of the Iron Curtain, while simultaneously loosening the ties that bound each alliance. Eventually, he hoped, this process of interpenetration would foster common values across the ideological divide, pull down the political and intellectual obstacles that separated East and West, and sweep away the communist order. In West Germany, Chancellor Willy Brandt reversed his country's longstanding refusal to recognize either the territorial results of the Second World War or its East German neighbor. By setting aside the diplomatic grievances that had pitted Bonn against Moscow and its allies, he reasoned, *Ostpolitik* would help states and citizens understand each other better, which in turn would alleviate the Cold War's human costs and enrich both sides. Over the long term, the process would reunify both Germany and the continent and establish a durable peace.

The interplay of these conservative and transformative strategies defined the process commonly known as *détente*. In responding to the crises that beset them, *détente*'s protagonists did not simply want to reduce the danger of war or to quell internal unrest. More broadly, they sought new principles of legitimacy on which to rebuild both domestic and international

order. Their immediate goals overlapped enough to produce a series of diplomatic achievements, including the US-Soviet Interim Agreement on nuclear weapons, West Germany's treaties with its eastern neighbors, and the four-power deal on Berlin. Because the leaders' worldviews and long-term objectives diverged, however, they pursued different concepts of order and interpreted these agreements in different ways.³⁰

The creation of the CSCE epitomized *détente's* ambitions and tensions. In the mid-1960s, the Warsaw Pact called on the Western allies to participate in negotiations on European security. Brezhnev and his colleagues wanted a multilateral agreement to recognize the continent's post-1945 political and territorial status quo and, by extension, to secure the USSR's reputation as a champion of peace and affirm its status as the equal of any capitalist state. At a time when Marxism-Leninism had lost its vitality and the command economy struggled to meet citizens' basic needs, a high-profile conference along these lines would throw the communist system a "life preserver" by renewing its popular appeal, as one official in Moscow put it. To press their case, the Soviets sought to exploit the crisis of legitimacy unfolding in the capitalist world. They wagered that Western politicians would find themselves unable to resist a campaign that combined diplomatic pressure and grassroots activism in the name of peace.³¹

The Western allies initially rebuffed the Warsaw Pact's appeals. In their view, the Soviets simply wanted to foreclose the possibility of German reunification and expand their influence across the continent. They also feared that a conference would further erode public support for NATO by giving citizens the false impression that the Cold War's major problems had been solved. But the Soviets refused to drop the idea, and Western officials eventually changed their minds. If the allies rejected the conference, they reasoned, citizens might conclude that their governments did not take peace seriously, and that NATO posed a greater threat to international stability than the Warsaw Pact. Besides, the 1967 Harmel Report had committed the alliance to negotiating with the Eastern powers. Unless Western officials pursued every diplomatic opening, including the conference idea, they would make a mockery of this bid to renew NATO's purpose.

Having decided to participate in the conference, the Western allies devised a plan to turn it to their advantage. Through a series of contentious discussions, the allies crafted a set of proposals that encapsulated their priorities. They announced that they would participate in a conference, but only on condition that other East-West negotiations—especially on the status of Germany and Berlin—reached successful conclusions first. They also insisted on expanding the conference agenda beyond the Soviets' narrow conception of security. It had to include items designed to undermine the Brezhnev Doctrine, communist restrictions on travel and emigration, and strict censorship, among other things. In this way, the Western allies sought

to exploit the crisis of the Eastern order, claim the moral high ground in the Cold War, and advance the transformative strategy of *détente*.

This drawn-out process illustrated the political culture of each alliance and its understanding of international order. The Warsaw Pact operated on the principle of centralized control, with the USSR setting the direction and expecting its allies to follow. Some of the Eastern Europeans made their mark by pursuing their own goals, but Moscow's heavy-handed methods prevented them from stepping too far out of line. In persuading the West to participate in the conference, the Soviets relied on persistence rather than finesse, lobbying officials and appealing to public opinion until they finally got the answer they wanted. By contrast, NATO's messy, decentralized deliberations made up in creativity what they lacked in efficiency. Although the Nixon administration regarded the conference as a meaningless—perhaps even dangerous—exercise, it deferred to the Western Europeans' enthusiasm. Whereas the arguments within the Warsaw Pact stifled new ideas, those within NATO fostered them. In the process, the allies reworked a communist concept to suit liberal democratic purposes. The West transformed the conference from an exercise in damage control into a tool for waging cold war by other means.

III

In launching the CSCE, all of the participating states took a gamble. The conference offered the first chance in decades to reexamine “the legitimate design of the international system for all of Europe,” as one observer put it, but no one could foresee its outcome. If it succeeded, it might resolve the crises that gripped East and West. If it failed, however, it could wreck *détente* and plunge the continent into a new era of confrontation. When the participants first assembled in 1972, they agreed to work by strict consensus, which meant that no one could impose his views on the others. The traditional measures of power, whether military, economic, or demographic, did not determine a state's influence at the bargaining table. Neither the Soviets nor the Americans dominated the proceedings, and a number of smaller countries—Eastern, Western, and neutral—enjoyed disproportionate clout, thanks to a combination of diplomatic savvy, stubbornness, and a willingness to take risks.³²

At the conference, the Soviets championed an idea of peace in which security demanded impermeability. The more robust the barriers between states, they reasoned, the safer governments would be. They therefore urged the West to recognize Europe's frontiers as eternal and immutable, and they argued for a categorical understanding of sovereignty that empowered states to treat their citizens as they pleased (with the proviso that socialist

states could forfeit their claims to sovereignty if they backslid into counter-revolution). By seeking better access to foreign markets for their exports while preserving the system of centralized planning, they tried to reap the rewards of globalization without succumbing to its liberalizing pressures. They wanted to protect their closed societies, keeping their own citizens in and dangerous ideas out. In short, they sought to bring the Soviet order into closer but strictly controlled contact with the rest of Europe, while maintaining the essential differences between East and West.

According to the Western concept of peace, by contrast, security required openness. As barriers between states fell, so would mutual suspicion and the danger of war. People, ideas, and goods ought to circulate more freely across borders. In line with the principle of self-determination, states had the right to redraw their frontiers peacefully and to choose their allies. They enjoyed the prerogatives of sovereignty, but were likewise constrained by the imperatives of human rights. One standard of conduct ought to govern the whole continent, with no distinction between communist and non-communist countries. This approach assumed that the creation of a single European order would gradually reunify East and West, and that, as the two systems came into closer contact, liberal democracy's inherent superiority would lead to its eventual triumph. In the first half of the twentieth century, most Western governments had feared the spread of Bolshevik ideas. Now, despite their ongoing domestic challenges, they welcomed the prospect of a head-to-head competition, while Soviet leaders feared it.

On nearly every issue, the Eastern and Western demands stood in opposition to each other. Because they shared so little common ground, the negotiators could not simply split their differences. Although the Soviets hoped to make rapid progress, the conference became a war of attrition. The Eastern representatives tried to flatter, persuade, and bully their challengers into accepting their proposals and endeavored to turn the Western allies against each other. Soviet leaders appealed to their Western counterparts, especially senior figures in the Nixon and Ford administrations, to rein in their demands. For their part, the Western delegations calculated that if the Kremlin wanted a successful outcome, it would agree to pay a high price for it. Sooner or later, the Soviets would lose their nerve and agree to make major concessions. For this approach to work, however, the allies had to outlast their interlocutors and stay united. To resolve their many disagreements—about what to demand, when to push, and when to conciliate—they consulted incessantly. The neutral and nonaligned states played a key role throughout, serving as go-betweens and working out solutions that both sides could accept.

As the Final Act took shape, its three main sections—dubbed “baskets” by the negotiators—hewed more closely to the West's goals than to those of the East. In the first basket, which focused on international security, the

diplomats crafted a “Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States.” Its ten points included elements of both the Eastern and Western visions of international order, but it dashed the Soviets’ hopes of entrenching Europe’s territorial and political status quo. Although it endorsed the continent’s existing borders, it did not recognize them as permanent. Instead, it affirmed that states could redraw them peacefully. By asserting that the principles of self-determination and nonintervention in domestic affairs applied to all states, regardless of their social systems, and that each state had the freedom to change its alliances, the Declaration invalidated the Brezhnev Doctrine. By proclaiming that respect for individual human rights constituted a core principle of international security, it pointed toward an expansive understanding of peace, in which the way that states treated their own citizens mattered as much as how they treated their neighbors. This emphasis on human rights also implied that certain universal values superseded the prerogatives of individual states, and that no state enjoyed unqualified sovereignty.

The other sections of the Final Act were shot through with the Western principles of openness and transparency. In the second basket, which dealt with economic, scientific, and environmental cooperation, the Soviets wanted the West to commit, at least in principle, to granting them most favored nation (MFN) status. The Western allies refused, largely because the Soviets rejected their demands to relax state management of international trade. Nonetheless, the participants agreed to publish more economic information, to expand contacts between enterprises, and to improve working conditions for foreign businessmen. More dramatically, the third basket, which concerned humanitarian cooperation, gave concrete form to Western ideas about freer movement. Participants had to expand international travel, promote the reunification of divided families, increase the circulation of foreign books, newspapers, and films, and improve journalists’ working conditions. Finally, a set of military confidence-building measures (CBMs) required each government to provide advance notification of troop maneuvers and to invite foreign observers to watch them. According to the measures’ Western originators, dispelling military secrecy would promote mutual understanding and mitigate the risk of conflict.

Although the Final Act endorsed a more open, flexible, and humane approach to international affairs, it left important questions unresolved. To attack the Brezhnev Doctrine, the Western allies emphasized that the principles of nonintervention and sovereign equality applied across Europe. But the USSR and its allies could cite these same principles to rebuff unwelcome demands on freer movement. In addition, the Soviets insisted on a number of stipulations that, in their view, would protect them from Western pressure to change their domestic systems. As a result of their efforts, the preamble to Basket III stipulated that humanitarian cooperation had to

“take place in full respect for” the principles enumerated in the first basket, including nonintervention. The principle of sovereign equality recognized each state’s right to “determine its laws and regulations.” And the third basket’s text on human contacts declared that its measures—on international travel and family reunification, among other things—could only be enacted “under mutually acceptable conditions.” The resulting ambiguities about the relationship between the Final Act’s promises and each state’s sovereign authority set the stage for future disputes about how to implement the agreement.³³

From a certain perspective, it is puzzling that the CSCE’s results bore so little resemblance to the USSR’s goals. After all, the Soviets recognized the dangers inherent in the West’s objectives, they fielded an experienced and shrewd delegation, and the rule of consensus equipped them to reject any proposal they deemed unwelcome. But they also made tactical errors that allowed the Western allies to press their case. Soviet leaders were so determined to bring the CSCE to a successful conclusion that they imposed artificial time constraints on their own delegation, which found itself compelled to make major concessions to get a deal. They underestimated the strength of Western solidarity and overestimated their own ability to tamp down the West’s most ambitious demands. Despite Brezhnev and Gromyko’s entreaties, and despite his own skepticism of the CSCE, Henry Kissinger refused to provoke an intra-NATO rupture over the conference. He intervened in the negotiations on several occasions, but his efforts did more to advance Western European goals than those of the USSR.

The Eastern allies also suffered from strategic problems. They failed to develop an offensive concept of cooperation that served communist interests in the same way that openness and freer movement served liberal democratic ones. Instead of confronting Western demands in these areas with demands of their own, they played defense. They took refuge in linguistic ambiguities and hoped that oblique references to state sovereignty would blunt the impact of the concessions they made. Even more surprising, a number of Soviet officials sympathized with the Western allies’ proposals. Although they remained committed communists, they believed that their country needed to open itself to the world. For this reason, they did not resist the West’s demands as strenuously as they might have, and may even have welcomed the CSCE as an opportunity to push the Soviet system in the direction of reform.

The negotiations demonstrated the contradictions of Brezhnev’s strategy. In trying to renew the Soviet order’s claim to legitimacy, the general secretary invited challenges to that legitimacy. Unable to avoid the concessions that the Western allies demanded, he and his colleagues hoped to have it both ways. They planned to claim simultaneously that the Final Act was a sacred document that imposed solemn obligations, and that their govern-

ments' sovereign rights allowed them to violate it at will. They intended to publicize it as a victory for communism, but counted on their citizens to ignore the sections that the authorities found inconvenient. They demanded that foreign governments treat some provisions—such as the inviolability of frontiers—as meaningful, but expected them to accept others—such as the peaceful change of frontiers and freer movement—as dead letters.

In these ways, the CSCE illustrated the dilemmas of statecraft in the 1970s. Power came in many forms, not all of them commensurable. By any military criterion, for example, the USSR had never been so strong, and Brezhnev assumed that the recent expansion of the Soviet nuclear arsenal would give the country the upper hand at the negotiating table. But conventional forces and ballistic missiles could not make the country secure in the absence of legitimacy, nor did they translate directly into diplomatic influence. In Helsinki and Geneva, Soviet delegates often found themselves bereft of the leverage necessary to achieve their objectives. The Western allies used this dynamic to their advantage. The ability to shape the rules of the international game constituted a source of power in its own right—harder to measure than economic output or the size of an armored division, but no less important. The Final Act was only a nonbinding declaration, not a treaty. It had no army standing behind it, and no authority under international law. Yet by rewriting the principles of legitimacy, by articulating a particular definition of peace, and by establishing a single international order in Europe, it held out the possibility of transforming the Cold War.

IV

After the Helsinki summit, the struggle to craft the Final Act was replaced by a new struggle to interpret and implement it. Leaders and diplomats on both sides of the Iron Curtain claimed that the agreement vindicated their principles and reflected their goals. Nonetheless, it was the Kremlin's narrative of the CSCE that gained popular currency in East and West alike. Most Western onlookers read the agreement as an endorsement of Moscow's objectives, and they argued that the United States and its allies had capitulated to Brezhnev's demands. In the Soviet bloc, even those dissidents who mistrusted official pronouncements took the same view.

As the months passed, however, these doubters reconsidered the Final Act. Soviet and Eastern European intellectuals concluded that its provisions offered useful tools for challenging state control. Thousands of average Eastern Europeans cited the agreement when they applied for exit visas. Across the region, activists called on party leaders to respect fundamental

human rights. In the West, politicians and campaigners started looking for ways to pressure the Eastern governments to live up to the promises they had made in Helsinki. During the original negotiations, the Western Europeans had charged ahead while the Americans had hung back. By the end of the decade, however, the Americans had been converted to their allies' transformational logic. A cross-border network took shape, connecting Western officials and civil society groups with activists in the East.

With the Americans in the lead, the Western allies used the CSCE's follow-up meetings to try to enforce the Final Act. At these conferences, held in Belgrade from 1977 to 1978 and Madrid from 1980 to 1983, they raised the cases of dozens of political prisoners and demanded that the Soviets and their allies honor the principles of freer movement and greater openness. These tactics outraged Brezhnev and his colleagues, who objected to what they regarded as interference in their domestic affairs. At the conferences, Soviet and Eastern European diplomats tried to redirect the conversation toward their ongoing peace campaign and proposals for disarmament, but had limited success. Because of this impasse, which reprised familiar arguments from Helsinki and Geneva, the meeting in Belgrade ended without substantive agreement. Exacerbated by the resurgence of international tensions and the violence in Afghanistan and Poland, the meeting in Madrid nearly collapsed entirely.

Nonetheless, the CSCE survived. At the nadir of East-West relations, the Soviets could have withdrawn from the conference to shield themselves from Western criticism, but they did not. Even as the two sides suspended arms control negotiations and engaged in bitter recriminations, the CSCE remained a vital channel of communication. By this point, the Soviet government had tied itself so closely to the Final Act that it could not afford to repudiate it without damaging its own legitimacy. During the Solidarity crisis in Poland, the USSR declined to act on the Brezhnev Doctrine and insisted that the government in Warsaw reestablish order on its own. Moreover, at the Madrid meeting, the Soviets and their allies agreed to expand the CSCE's guarantees of freer movement and individual rights.

The challenge of enforcing the Final Act changed dramatically in 1985 when Mikhail Gorbachev took office in Moscow. The new general secretary reexamined the USSR's longstanding concept of peace and concluded that cooperation in the name of universal values and shared interests had to replace the old dogmas of class conflict. States could only be secure if they understood each other, which in turn required the circulation of people and ideas across borders. This new commitment to openness, transparency, and interdependence echoed the Final Act's core principles. Instead of resisting his country's obligations under the CSCE, Gorbachev looked for ways to fulfill them. Soviet policy at home and abroad changed accordingly. The government released imprisoned dissidents, relaxed censorship, and

consented to on-site military inspections. At the Vienna follow-up meeting, which ran from 1986 to 1989, the USSR's new flexibility yielded an agreement that outstripped anything negotiated in Belgrade or Madrid. In turn, Gorbachev cited its provisions to rebuff his domestic critics' complaints and justify further reforms.

The revolutions of 1989 demonstrated how profoundly the Final Act had reshaped international affairs in Europe. In Poland, the agreement had inspired Solidarity's organizers at the beginning of the decade. Now, it served as a reference point during the union's negotiations with the government, which paved the way for free elections. Hungarian leaders embraced the principle of freer movement in opening their borders to East German refugees who wanted to flee to the Federal Republic. The East German government honored the Final Act's provisions on the rights of foreign journalists, which in turn enabled West German correspondents to bring news and images of watershed protests to the rest of the world. Meanwhile, Gorbachev disclaimed the Brezhnev Doctrine on the grounds that self-determination and nonintervention trumped the logic of proletarian internationalism. The USSR left its Eastern European allies to make their own decisions.

After the Berlin Wall fell, the Final Act provided the blueprint for the peace settlement that ended the Cold War. In the talks on the future of Germany, it guided leaders on all sides. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl invoked the principle of the peaceful change of frontiers to justify his plans for reunification. In making the case that the newly reunited country should be allowed to join NATO, the West Germans and Americans cited the agreement's stipulation that all countries had the authority to choose their own allies. The CSCE also figured prominently in Gorbachev's own designs for the future of Europe, although these differed from those of his Western interlocutors. Eventually, however, he accepted Bonn and Washington's arguments, endorsed German reunification, and consented to withdraw Soviet forces from German territory.

In November 1990, the second summit meeting in CSCE history set forth the principles that would govern the new Europe. The Paris Charter, signed in the French capital, recapitulated the Final Act's core ideas. It extolled the virtues of interdependence and freer movement, and committed its signatories to respect their citizens' fundamental rights and to promote greater transparency in military, economic, and cultural affairs. Compared to the original negotiations in Helsinki and Geneva, the drafting of the charter had moved rapidly, especially because the participants now shared similar assumptions about international politics. The Western concepts of legitimacy and peace, as embodied in the Final Act, had gained credence across the continent.

The signing of the Final Act was a watershed in the Cold War. In his memoirs, Anatoly Kovalev, who headed the Soviet delegation in Geneva, argued that the reunification of Europe represented “the victory of détente” and, especially, the victory of the Final Act.³⁴ The history of the CSCE bears out his point. It makes clear that détente was not an ephemeral phenomenon, but had transformative consequences. It also offers a powerful example of what diplomacy can achieve. The leaders who embarked on the CSCE turned the crises of the 1960s into an opportunity to reimagine East-West relations. In turn, the negotiators in Helsinki and Geneva articulated a new vision for Europe on the basis of shared values, common interests, and a unified international order. Their work, simultaneously epic and abstruse, did not create a perfect peace, but it hastened the end of the superpower conflict and laid the foundations for the post-Cold War world.

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