

■ December 7, 1970: the signing of the treaty by which Germany recognized Poland's western border

The signing on December 7, 1970 of the treaty in which the Federal Republic of Germany recognized the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka rivers deserves recognition as a significant accomplishment of the Polish government and, in particular, as the achievement of Władysław Gomułka's personal goal. The visit to Warsaw of Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt alone was without precedent. His signing of the document ended a period of hostility and distrust in Polish-West German relations.

“A long green-cloth-covered table stood in the center of the Column Hall in the Palace of the Office of the Council of Ministers on Krakowskie Przedmieście [today's Presidential Palace]. Atop the table were pennants with the national flags of Poland and West Germany. Minutes before noon, the Office's staff laid out two leather-bound copies of the Treaty between the Polish People's Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany Concerning the Bases of Normalization of their Mutual Relations bearing embossed emblems of the Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany.”

In addition to more than three hundred Polish and foreign journalists accredited to cover the event, the Column Hall ceremony drew a sizable crowd of guests. They included the Catholic journalist Stanisław Stomma, who for years had strived to seal a Polish-German agreement, and Edmund Osmańczyk, who dealt with German affairs and authored the famous book “Sprawy Polaków” [“The Affairs of the Poles”] on Polish historical memory. Also among those present was Mieczysław Rakowski, a young editor-in-chief of the Polityka weekly with close ties to social democrats in West Germany. The communist authorities also showed up in large numbers. The West German guests included Egon Bahr, Carlo Schmid and Peter Bender, architects of Germany's rapprochement with Eastern Europe.

The Polish Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Federal Republic Willy Brandt entered the Column Hall at noon sharp, followed by Foreign Ministers Stefan Jędrzychowski and Walter Scheel and First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party Władysław Gomułka. Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz and Chancellor Brandt took their seats at the table and proceeded to sign the agreement. The Foreign Affairs Ministers soon followed suit. As photojournalists captured the historic moment, both sides were visibly pleased.

Although the photo of Brandt kneeling at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, taken a few hours later, would go down in history as one of the most moving images of the 20th century, what counted the most for the event's hosts was the prime reason for which the



German chancellor had embarked on his visit to Warsaw in the first place, which was to conclude the treaty on the bases for normalization of mutual relations. The key part of the document was Article 1, in which the Contracting Parties unanimously “reaffirm [that] the frontier between them, whose course is defined (...) from the Baltic Sea directly west of Świnoujście and along the Odra River to the confluence of the Nysa Łużycka and on to the border with Czechoslovakia, constitutes the western state border of the Polish People’s Republic”. The Agreement continues: “The Contracting Parties declare that the frontier between them is inviolable now and in the future and mutually pledge to respect unconditionally their sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

It is no exaggeration to say that for decades after it was demarcated in Potsdam in the summer of 1945, the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka rivers was Europe’s most questioned frontier. Unlike the GDR, which acknowledged the frontier as early as 1950, West Germany refused to accept it quoting its uncertain status, borne out in repeated statements in the West and used by the Soviet Union for its own purposes. Bonn’s unceasing contestation of the post-war border arrangements in the east left Poland reliant on the Soviets for their protection. Moscow also seemed to have the exclusive right to define Polish policy on Germany.

It was also in Warsaw that communist leaders would address the Polish nation to legitimize their rule by referring to their alliance with Moscow that was meant to serve as a safeguard against West German revisionism. The threat from “Bonn-based reprisers and revisionists” became a recurring theme in speeches by party officials, and especially by First Secretary Gomułka. This had the effect of cementing hostility towards West Germans among the Polish public. Polish bishops learned this the hard way in 1965, when, on the eve of the Millennial Anniversary of the Polish State, they reached out to “their German bishop brothers” by both offering and requesting forgiveness. The Polish Catholic community responded to this gesture with great reluctance, to say the least.

However, Bonn’s recognition of the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka rivers was also Poland’s central foreign policy goal and Gomułka’s near obsession. The prospects for achieving this goal were undoubtedly improved by the change of guard in Germany, as the Social Democratic Chancellor Brandt launched his Neue Ostpolitik of rapprochement with Eastern Europe with a view to strengthening Bonn’s standing in Europe and securing German reunification. Shortly after he became Chancellor on October 28, 1969, Brandt announced in the Bundestag he would turn to the Polish authorities to launch talks. This was his response to Gomułka’s surprising statement of May 17, 1969, which was never consulted with Moscow, whereby Poles were prepared to sign an agreement with Germany regarding Bonn’s recognition of the western border at any time.

Warsaw welcomed Brandt’s offer. Gomułka embraced it in high hopes not only of achieving his life’s goal of having the Federal Republic of Germany recognize the Odra and Nysa Łużycka frontier but also to secure Bonn’s support for Poland’s sputtering economy. Years later, the journalist Ryszard Wojna, who was also one of the First



Secretary's advisers, admitted that "the party leaders of the time had the pipe dream of seeing unrealistically vast amounts of money stream from Germany to Poland".

In February 1970, negotiations began with Warsaw proposing to conclude an agreement on Germany's recognition of Poland's western border. This was an unquestionable success of Polish diplomacy that was just as significant as the fact that the talks had been launched without the involvement of the Soviets, who almost simultaneously held their own negotiations with Bonn on the presumption that they were entitled to represent the entire communist bloc. And yet, differences in the expectations and aspirations of the two sides soon became apparent. While Gomułka wanted West Germany to recognize the border on the Oder and Nysa Łużycka Rivers, all that the West German side was prepared to commit to was to refrain from the use of force. The Germans sought to defer border recognition until the German reunification would be complete.

A new problem arose on August 12, 1970, the day the German-Soviet negotiations ended with the signing of an agreement in which Bonn recognized the Odra and Nysa Łużycka border. In the very scenario that Gomułka had been seeking to prevent, Germany recognized the inviolability of the western border with the intermediation of Moscow as the Soviet Union resorted to its usual practice of securing the interests of its satellite states without their knowledge if not against their will.

This made the job of Polish negotiators all the more difficult as Bonn suggested adopting the existing wording of the Moscow agreement in its treaty with Poland without explicitly referring to the border issue. Gomułka strongly opposed this suggestion. His adamant insistence on having Germany expressly recognize the border irrespectively of arrangements with Moscow was without a precedent. Undoubtedly, the Polish communist authorities put into question Moscow's claim to defining their relations with Bonn. Viewed in hindsight, Poland's stance comes across as an act of insubordination of sorts. Against this background, it is worth noting the comments expressed in the building of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in late December 1970, i.e. after Gomułka's ousting. The word was that Leonid Brezhnev never forgave Gomułka for his interference in dealings with Germany, which was why he did not come to his defense when Edward Gierek took power.

All that though would only transpire several days later. At the time the agreement was locked on December 7, 1970, Gomułka had good reason to feel contented. Witnesses said he had been beaming as he received congratulations. Rakowski said to him: "You have done this, this is your day." In the afternoon on that day, Gomułka and Brandt proceeded to talk one to one. Even considering interpretation time (Gomułka's interpreter was Dr. Mieczysław Tomala, who would subsequently go on to become Poland's leading expert on Germany), the fact that their meeting lasted over three hours was very significant. The First Secretary broached the subject of reparations. He admitted that Poland had renounced them earlier but noted that about 10 million Poles could theoretically claim compensation from Germany. He suggested that Poland be granted an enormous loan of 10 billion marks and that the interest due on the loan be paid by the federal government. This would be tantamount to Poland renouncing all claims to damages. The Chancellor



declined arguing that the federal budget would be unable to bear such a burden. Despite this, Gomułka walked away from the meeting satisfied.

The big challenge for the Polish authorities was to get an appropriate message across to the general public. Even the fact that Poland so much as engaged in talks with a state that until recently had been the target of vicious propaganda attacks required an explanation. Therefore, the party headquarters prepared a body of materials to be used in a large-scale instructional campaign for party speakers. One of the brochures that formed the material read: "Our efforts (...) are consistent with the vital interests of Poland and the entire socialist community. They pave the way for normalizing relations among all states and for a peaceful future across Europe." Reports were submitted to the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party on the public sentiment and on how the talks were received. They showed that the matter was of great interest not only to "party activists" but also to the majority of Poles. As soon as the agreement was signed, discussions broke out in the censorship office, the editorial office of the *Trybuna Ludu* daily and - above all - the Central Committee, on the coverage of the visit of the Federal Chancellor and the signed document. One of the conclusions was to refrain from publishing the photo of Brandt kneeling at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and to only release the picture of the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Although the communist government succeeded in sticking to their basic political line on the German issue as it got the German authorities expressly to recognize the western border, the victory turned out to be only partial. The Brandt administration faced fierce resistance from the Christian Democratic opposition, which viewed the signing of the treaty on the inviolability of the border as a sell-out that violated vital national interests. Germany's ratification of the treaty of December 7, 1970 became highly uncertain as the CDU/CSU called for rejecting the agreement flat out, which was quite a surprise to Warsaw. Without a majority in the Bundestag that was needed to ratify the document, Chancellor Brandt had no other choice but to make concessions.

A historic compromise was reached that consisted in adopting a resolution stating specifically that the agreements with the USSR and Poland had been signed not on behalf of Germany, but only on behalf of West Germany. Therefore, they did not conclusively confine the German state to the borders established on December 31, 1937. The resolution also stated that the main goal of all political forces in Germany was to reunify their country. It was not until May 17, 1972 that a resolution was passed in the Bundestag, followed by a vote on the ratification of the treaty with Poland. In it, 248 deputies voted in favor and 17 against with 231 abstentions, which meant that the resolution was passed. Polish censorship silenced all media reports on its adoption. Its wording gave various political forces in Germany solid arguments to question the recognition of the border on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka rivers. This was incomprehensible to many Poles who believed that the matter had been finally settled on December 7, 1970. However, as it turned out, another two decades would pass before the settlement would finally be concluded.



Instytut Zachodni
im. Zygmunta Wojciechowskiego

Written by Prof. dr hab. Jadwiga Kiwerska