

Name _____

Date _____

Case Study: The Helsinki Accords

Read and annotate the passage below.

Introduction

On August 1, 1975, in the midst of the Cold War era, President Gerald R. Ford signed the historic Helsinki Accords between the Soviet Union and the United States, Canada, and most European countries (except Albania). The accords were signed in Helsinki, Finland by 35 countries and marked the conclusion of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). The accords covered a wide range of issues, including territorial borders, cooperation among signing countries, and human rights.

The Helsinki Accords were an attempt to lessen tensions between the Soviet Union and United States and its European allies. Today, the accords are often credited with helping to pave the way for dissidents in Eastern Europe. The accords also helped improve communication between the Eastern and Western Bloc countries, and they are seen as a major turning point in the Cold War. At the time they were signed, however, the Helsinki Accords were controversial both in the United States and abroad.

Geography

World War II (1939-1945) devastated much of Europe. More than forty million Europeans were killed during the course of the war, and forty million more became refugees. Cities throughout the region were left with major damage to their infrastructure. During the war, borders throughout Europe were changing as the Axis powers (led by Germany, Italy, and Japan) and Allied powers (led by the U.S., the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union) gained and lost territory.

In the aftermath of World War II, these fluctuating political boundaries in Europe had to be settled. Countries occupying foreign territory at the end of the war did not always want to cede that territory back. In addition, countries that had lost territory in the aftermath of WWI sought to reclaim some of that lost territory. Post-WWII agreements formalized new boundaries, which largely favored the victorious allied countries. In this way, for example, Poland lost some eastern territory to the Soviet Union, but gained territory in the north and west from Germany. Czechoslovakia and Germany also lost territory to the Soviet Union.

By 1975, the political geography of Europe had polarized along East-West lines. There were uneasy borders between “Eastern Bloc” countries led by the Soviet Union and “Western Bloc” countries led by the U.S. and its allies. Walls and borders defenses separated the Eastern and Western blocs, and people could not travel freely between them. These borders were also ideological and were symbolized by the term “iron curtain” to describe the Soviet-influenced

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countries. Nowhere was this division more apparent than in Germany. After the war, Germany was divided into occupied territories, with the U.S. controlling the western half, and the Soviet Union controlling the eastern half. The city of Berlin was similarly divided, and a wall was built separating East Berlin from West Berlin. In the countries behind the iron curtain, the Soviet Union kept tight control over markets, and human rights violations were not uncommon.

The Eastern European Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had been occupied and later annexed by Soviet armies during WWII. During the time between the end of WWII and the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975, the Soviet Union took measures to weaken the national identities of these states. There were mass deportations to other parts of the Soviet Union, including the cold northern steppe region of Siberia. There was also an influx of workers from other parts of the Soviet Union. The effects of this changed the demographics of the Baltic states dramatically. For example, in Estonia, ethnic Estonians comprised 88% of the country's population before WWII. By 1959, that number had dropped to under 75%, and by 1989, it was almost 60%.

In 1975, most western countries refused to recognize the Baltic states as part of the Soviet Union. Instead they regarded those states as sovereign nations.

Assessment

The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe took place during a time in the Cold War where the U.S. and the Soviet Union were pursuing *détente*, or a lessening of hostilities between the two countries. The *détente* led to increased talks and cooperation between the two countries. During this period, the United States and its European allies agreed to talks on the situation in Europe that the Soviet Union had been seeking since the 1950s.

Plans for the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe divided the topics for negotiation into four "baskets." The first basket dealt with political and security issues in Europe. These included providing means for a peaceful settlement of disputes, defining borders, agreeing that no country's territory should be violated, and agreeing that no country should interfere with the internal affairs of another country. The second basket focused on scientific and economic cooperation between participating countries. The third basket addressed human rights. These included freedom for people to travel across borders, freedom of the press, freedom of religion and thought, and increased cultural exchange between eastern and western European countries. The fourth basket dealt with implementing the accords and setting follow-up meetings.

Conflict

The United States and the Soviet Union had waged a Cold War since the end of WWII. Though allies during the war, the two countries had strongly opposing views on government and

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economic systems. At the end of WWII, tensions arose as new borders were claimed across Europe. The U.S. and its allies felt that the Soviet Union was aggressively gaining territory. The U.S. refused to formally recognize the former Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia as part of the Soviet Union. The two countries also clashed over the division of Germany after the war, with the result that the country was split in two—East Germany and West Germany. Largely because of the threat of nuclear retaliation, hostilities never broke out into a direct confrontation between the two super powers. However, both countries supported different sides in conflicts across the globe, seeking to gain influence from the Middle East to Asia to South America.

In Europe, the proximity of the Soviet Union and its allies to Western European allies of the U.S. created tense borders and military build-up. Western European countries formed an alliance with the United States and Canada called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies formed the Warsaw Pact. Both organizations agreed that member countries would go to the defense of one another in case of attack.

Stakeholders

NATO allies:

The United States' NATO allies were more heavily involved in the negotiations leading up to the CSCE than was the United States. These allies were in favor of Ford signing the Helsinki Accords because they believed that they would lead to more stability in Europe. NATO countries also hoped that the accords would mean less restrictions on travel from behind the iron curtain to Western Europe. Another important consideration for NATO allies in Western Europe was the promise of trade agreements between Eastern Europe and Western Europe, which would open up new markets for European goods.

Soviet Union:

The Soviet Union had been proposing talks between Eastern and Western Bloc European countries since the mid 1950s. By the mid 1960s, the Warsaw Pact countries outlined territorial and ideological issues that were incorporated into the Helsinki Accords. Through the accords, the Soviet Union hoped to gain recognition of its current borders from the U.S. and European countries. These borders had been a point of disagreement in Europe since the end of WWII. For example, the U.S., as well as other western nations, refused to acknowledge that the Baltic states were part of the Soviet Union. The Helsinki Accords included a provision that European borders should be stable but could be changed by peaceful means. The Soviet Union believed that by signing the accords, the U.S. was tacitly recognizing the current borders of the Soviet Union.

Eastern European countries:

As members of the Warsaw Pact, Eastern European countries were in favor of President Ford

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signing the Helsinki Accords. The reasons were similar to those of the Soviet Union. They wanted the west to recognize borders as they stood at the time. At the same time, in many of these states there was significant political unrest. Citizens objected to the rule of the communist governments, often seen as stand-ins or puppets for the Soviet Union. They particularly objected to the suppression of human rights that was common in Eastern Bloc countries. The point of view of these objectors at the time is not well documented. However, as the treaty was publicized in Eastern Bloc countries, more and more citizens began to demand their human rights under the accords.

U.S. public:

In the United States, the public was generally not in favor of President Ford signing the Helsinki Accords. One major concern was that in signing the accords, the U.S. was acknowledging Soviet control over Eastern Europe. Many in the U.S. felt that the Soviet Union gained more from the accords than the U.S. did. In the period leading up to President Ford's trip to Helsinki, he received many letters urging him not to sign the accords. A Wall Street Journal article entitled "Jerry Don't Go" summarized the public's opinion that Ford should not attend the CSCE and sign the accords. Other newspapers, including the *New York Times*, published similar articles.

Eastern European immigrants:

Americans with Eastern European backgrounds were particularly opposed to Ford signing the Helsinki Accords. They felt that by signing the accords, the United States was formally recognizing that the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania were part of the Soviet Union. They also felt that the accords meant that U.S. policy toward the Baltic states would change, and the Baltic states would no longer have U.S. support. Similarly, they perceived the accords were an indication that the United States had given up on Eastern European countries, many of which actively resisted Soviet rule. The President was so concerned with this opposition to the Helsinki Accords that he met with members of several ethnic groups of Eastern European background shortly before leaving for Helsinki to assure them that U.S. support for Eastern Europe would not change.

U.S. Congress:

Members of Congress had many of the same misgivings about the Helsinki Accords that the American public had. They felt that the Soviet Union gained more from the accords than the U.S. did. They also felt that by signing, President Ford was abandoning Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. Ford was criticized by both Republicans and Democrats for signing the accords. Senator Henry Jackson of Washington said of Ford's decisions to travel to Helsinki and sign the accords "There are times in international diplomacy when the President of the United States ought to stay home." A group of Senators wrote to the President asking him to delay the final stage of the CSCE until terms more favorable to the U.S. could be negotiated. A resolution to require Congressional approval for the accords before the President could sign was proposed just before the President left for Helsinki.