

Book Review

Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act – The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*, Princeton University Press, 2020.

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Almost half a century after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, Michael Morgan's book on this major event in the middle of the Cold War in Europe may be seen as a courageous effort to provide an in-depth historical analysis of this highly remarkable process which paved the way for major changes in the post-World War II order in Europe. For this reviewer, who has closely observed and frequently participated in C/OSCE events himself since the 1980s, the book is a great reminder of this unique diplomatic process which was at the origin of what is now known as the Helsinki Process and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Very few people at the time would have thought that the Helsinki negotiations would culminate in the signing of this historic document nor that this would become the basis for the development of Europe's largest security organization.

The author has not taken his task lightly. He explored the archives in not less than eight CSCE participating states (including Russia and the former German Democratic Republic), which has allowed him to enlighten his story with a large number of personal and historical anecdotes. The result is a very lively book that is well written and easy to read, which at the same time offers a balanced picture of the main trends in the international arena at that time.

Almost one third of the book contains extensive analysis of political developments leading to the Helsinki process. The author provides a good overview of the security situation in post-war Europe with the emphasis on nuclear deterrence and the finding of a balance after the Berlin and Cuba crises, which taught political leaders that the risk of a nuclear conflict was far too high.

The author correctly outlines how the two opposing military camps were far from monolithic. Already in the 1950s West European countries started demanding more influence on the policies of the NATO alliance, most clearly demonstrated by the French withdrawal from its military structures. In the East, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign in 1956 had a highly destabilizing impact, affecting the legitimacy of the communist international order. The Sino-Soviet rift and the military clashes between both countries in 1969 had a similar impact. In the author's view, both sides in the Cold War were more or less forced into what became the Helsinki process due to national and international threats to their legitimacy.

The Soviet Union was the strongest proponent of the idea of a multilateral conference that would solidify the post-war borders in Europe and Leonid Brezhnev, the leader of the communist party of the Soviet Union, became almost the personification of this drive. The author extensively explains that this fact is one of the main explanations why the conference, which after years of bickering finally was launched in 1972/73, became successful: Brezhnev had invested so much in it and his peace policy had become so dependent upon a successful outcome that he couldn't let it fail. The author's access to relevant reports of the discussions at the top level in the Soviet Union resulted in interesting stories about this backdrop.

The author provides a well-written overview of the main developments in the CSCE (from 1973-1975) which were preceded by the Multilateral Preparatory Talks (1972-1973), although his discussion of the MPT is surprisingly short, mainly enumerating the main achievements of this key phase in the conference.

The author is clearly convinced that the ultimate outcome of the conference in the form of the famous Helsinki Final Act was a major success for the Western countries. He disagrees with the frequently heard opinion that the document would basically be a *quid pro quo* in the sense that the communist countries got their key wish of a recognition of the post-war territorial status quo and the West managed to achieve results in the area of

human rights and humanitarian issues. In his view, the West won the war of attrition at the conference through its resilience and patience, whereas the USSR delegation was under the pressure from Moscow to come with results and preferably as quickly as possible. According to the author, the West won the battle because it reaped the main benefits from the conference in the sense that it managed to get all of their goals related to 'peaceful change of borders', the human rights principle as a separate principle and the interlinkage of the ten principles realized in the final text of the document. Issues which the Warsaw Pact countries had long resisted. Also, in the second and third baskets the author views the Western countries as the major beneficiaries. In his own words: "Instead of cementing the status quo, the Final Act established the rules for revising it" (p. 135).

The author describes in detail the negotiations in Geneva in all three baskets and, at the same time, clarifies a number of issues such as the background of the term 'basket' and why the CSCE decided to go for the highly expensive procedure of using six working languages, a process which persists today. As a matter of fact, the book is a treasure trove because of many such details which all constituted the building blocks for the present-day OSCE, the background of which is sometimes totally forgotten nowadays.

An interesting part of the book also describes how the Final Act was received in public opinion after its solemn signature in the Finnish capital in the summer of 1975. As a matter of fact, the receipt was chilly, including comments that the West had betrayed the people in the eastern part of Europe. Soon the perspective changed, however, when activists in Eastern Europe began to realise the true contents of the document and used it to 'offer' their authorities help with its implementation, particularly in the spheres of human rights and humanitarian issues. Quickly the document became a major tool in Western hands to chastise the communist leadership in the Warsaw Pact countries for their oppression of dissidents, curbing freedom of information and movement and other issues. The author aptly describes how this change took place and the impact it had on East-West relations, and possibly more importantly, on the situation within the communist bloc. It turned out that the leaders in Moscow had miscalculated when expecting that the inclusion of strongly worded texts on 'sovereignty' and 'non-interference in internal affairs' would protect them against too much intrusion from the West or from their own people. As a matter of fact, the Final Act functioned as a catalyst in a way nobody had foreseen at the moment the text was signed. Although this story is not particularly new, the author included a number of interesting details that made this part of the book worth reading.

The final chapter is mainly devoted to the major changes which took place in Europe after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in Moscow in 1985 and the enormous transformation he caused in the European security field with his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, 'new thinking' and 'Common European Home'. It was clear that the Final Act influenced these major changes in the traditional Soviet policies. This was clearly reflected in the Vienna Follow-up Meeting (1986-1989), which achieved very substantive results in each of the three baskets, but most of all in the domain of human rights with the establishment of intrusive new monitoring mechanisms (the Vienna Mechanism) and the mandate for the 1991 Moscow Human Dimension Conference.


The author, correctly, does not claim that the Final Act brought about the end of the Cold War, but he is definitely right in his conclusion that it was one of many complex reasons that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. He is also right in his observation that the principles of the Final Act played a major role in important post-Cold War developments such as the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine; German unification; states' ability to choose their own alliances; greater military transparency; respect for human rights; the interdependence of human rights and international security; the freer movement of people and ideas; and the economic integration of Europe according to free market principles (pp. 253-254). His conclusion, therefore, rings true: "In negotiating the Final

Act, the Soviets believed they were negotiating a definitive end to the Second World War, but it turned out that they were laying the foundations for the post- Cold War world instead. For all of these reasons, Helsinki deserves a place alongside Westphalia, Utrecht, Vienna, and Paris in the list of epoch-making diplomatic conferences.” (p. 254)

The book concludes with an almost prophetic final observation: “Because even the most carefully crafted settlements eventually become obsolete, international order requires constant maintenance and periodic reconstruction. The Final Act may have been a victory for Western principles, but in diplomacy, as in war, no result is ever final.” (p. 258) The present-day reality of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in violation of virtually all basic principles of the Final Act could not be a stronger proof of the author’s final statement.

Overall, Michael Morgan has written an excellent book about a great period in the post-World War II history of Europe and the Euro-Atlantic region, based on unique new findings and written in an easily accessible way. One of the strong aspects of his book is his effort to convincingly explain why the major actors played the ‘game’ as they did, as it is sometimes quite mysterious why the Soviets, in particular, gave in so many times, while they could have also walked out of the whole process.

However, he could have paid more systematic attention to the legal dimension of the Final Act, such as the talks on the non-intervention or non-interference principle (p. 179), which would have been worth discussing more extensively. In addition, more could have been said about the MPT, in particular because it was there that the groundwork for the whole Helsinki process was laid. Apart from such small issues, this book is definitely a worthy addition to the vast literature about the CSCE. At this moment of deep crisis in Europe and around the OSCE, the book may function as a reminder of how important it is not to let these major achievements – in particular the Decalogue of Principles of the Final Act - succumb as a result of the imperialist aggression by one OSCE state against another. The author may be right that not enough has been done to maintain and reconstruct the new international order brought about by the Helsinki Final Act. The future will tell whether this had fatal consequences. Strikingly, the future is likely to be decided by the war in Ukraine, an occurrence of destructive violence, the likes of which the Final Act was created to prevent.



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