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MILESTONES: 1969–1976

Helsinki Final Act, 1975

The Helsinki Final Act was an agreement signed by 35 nations that concluded the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, held in Helsinki, Finland. The multifaceted Act addressed a range of prominent global issues and in so doing had a far-reaching effect on the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet relations.



President Ford addresses the European Security Conference in Helsinki. (AP Photo)

The Helsinki Conference had its origins in early Cold War discussions. The Soviet Union first sought a European conference on security issues in 1954 at the Geneva Conference in the hopes that such a meeting would result in formal recognition of the political boundaries in Eastern Europe that had been established after World War II. At that time, the United States and the other Western nations were reluctant to engage in such a discussion because they feared that it might strengthen the Soviet position and lead to an expansion of communism. As a result, no progress was made through the 1950s and 1960s.

However, the shift towards détente during the early 1970s encouraged Western leaders to reconsider the negotiations. Discussions started with the Helsinki Consultations in 1972 and continued until the opening of the formal Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in July of 1973. From the summer of 1973 to the summer of 1975, intensive negotiations continued in Geneva, until the participants finally met again in Helsinki on August 1, 1975 to sign the Helsinki Final Act. Every European country except Albania signed the Act, in addition to the United States and Canada.

The Helsinki Final Act dealt with a variety of issues divided into four “baskets.” The first basket included ten principles covering political and military issues, territorial integrity, the definition of borders, peaceful settlement of disputes and the implementation of confidence building measures between opposing militaries. The second basket focused on economic issues like trade and scientific cooperation. The third basket emphasized human rights, including freedom of emigration and reunification of families divided by international borders, cultural exchanges and freedom of the press. Finally, the fourth basket formalized the details for follow-up meetings and implementation procedures. The CSCE held further meetings in Belgrade in 1977–78, Madrid in 1980–83, and Vienna in 1986–89.

Although initially unpopular in the West, the Helsinki Final Act proved important at the end of the Cold War. Some activists opposed the Western concession on boundaries that resulted in a formal acceptance of the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, effectively acknowledging Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. In spite of such criticism, the third basket on human rights and freedoms ultimately proved to be important to dissidents in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. To follow the progress of the USSR in implementing the human rights stipulations established in the Act, human rights activists set up Helsinki Monitoring Groups in the Soviet Union and across Europe. These groups tracked violations of the Act and drew international attention to human rights violations. Furthermore, the Belgrade follow-up meeting introduced a review process to track violators of the Helsinki Final Act and hold them accountable. Together these measures enabled dissidents to act and speak more openly than would otherwise have been possible.

The Helsinki Process, including the review meetings, led to greater cooperation between Eastern and Western Europe. Representatives from non-aligned countries acted as intermediaries, helping to broker deals between members of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) and the [Warsaw Pact](#). The Vienna Review Meeting introduced recognition of the rights of emigration and religious freedom, which helped to open ties between Eastern and Western Europe. In addition, the Vienna meetings launched a new series of CSCE conferences on the Human Dimension that took place concurrently with, and contributed to, widespread political and social changes in Europe. These shifts helped bring an end to Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War.

