

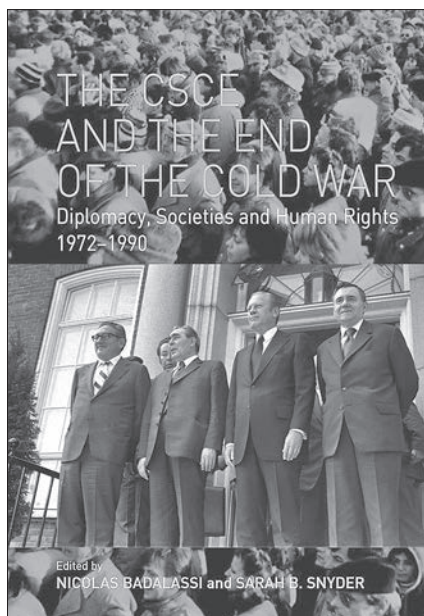
/// Milán Pap

=== Deal-makers, Human Rights Activists, and the Everyday Politics of the Helsinki Process

/// A BOOKREVIEW ON

Nicolas Badalassi and Sarah B. Snyder, eds.
*The CSCE and the End of the Cold War:
Diplomacy, Societies and Human Rights, 1972–1990.*

Berghahn Books, 2019. pp. 380



Abstract

This review examines *The CSCE and the end of the cold war: diplomacy, societies and Human Rights, 1972–1990*, edited by Nicolas Badalassi and Sarah B. Snyder (Berghahn Books, 2019). The volume brings together scholars from Europe and North America to explore the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and its 1975 Helsinki Final Act through three thematic clusters: diplomatic agency, transnational activism, and national case studies. The editors explicitly critique the “Kissingerization” of Cold War historiography, advocating instead for a bottom-up perspective attentive to mid-level diplomats, activists, and transnational networks. The review highlights the volume’s methodological innovations, particularly its prosopographical approach to diplomatic negotiations and its use of previously inaccessible archival materials. However, it identifies a significant

lacuna: the under-exploration of the intellectual history dimension—how key concepts like “security,” “peaceful coexistence,” and “sovereignty” were semantically contested and appropriated across different political cultures. A *Begriffsgeschichte* of the Helsinki process would complement the diplomatic and social movement approaches that currently dominate the field.

== The Cold War and the Importance of Helsinki

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and its 1975 Helsinki Final Act occupy a paradoxical place in Cold War historiography. At the time of signing, the agreement was widely regarded with skepticism or outright hostility across the political spectrum. Henry Kissinger famously dismissed Basket III’s provisions as something the Soviets could write “in Swahili” for all the difference they would make.¹ American conservatives attacked President Ford for legitimizing Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, while dissidents behind the Iron Curtain initially saw the conference as a Western capitulation to Brezhnev’s desire for recognition of the post-war territorial status quo.² Yet within fifteen years, the Helsinki process had come to be seen as a crucial factor in the transformation of East-West relations and the largely peaceful revolutions of 1989.

The Helsinki summit took place at a moment of profound crisis on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In the United States, 1975 marked a nadir in national confidence: the Watergate scandal had forced Nixon’s resignation the previous year; the Vietnam War ended in April with the humiliating evacuation of Saigon; New York City teetered on the edge of bankruptcy; oil prices continued to climb in the aftermath of the 1973 crisis; crime rates rose steadily; and public trust in political institutions had collapsed. Morgan Neville’s recent documentary *Breakdown: 1975* (2025) captures this atmosphere of national crisis through the era’s cinema—films like *Chinatown* (1974), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975)—that reflected a society confronting institutional corruption, urban decay, and disillusionment with authority. The Soviet bloc, meanwhile, was entering its long economic stagnation. The crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 and the subsequent Brezhnev Doctrine had eliminated reformist alternatives within state socialism, leaving opposition movements demoralized

1 == Jussi Hanhimäki, “They Can Write it in Swahili: Kissinger, the Soviets, and the Helsinki Accords, 1973–1975,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 37–58.

2 == On Ford’s domestic difficulties with Helsinki, see Sarah B. Snyder, “‘Jerry, Don’t Go’: Domestic Opposition to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act,” *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 67–81. Ford later reflected: “So for all these reasons, the European trip was likely to advance our hopes for peace. Yet no journey I made during my Presidency was so widely misunderstood. ‘Jerry, don’t go’, the Wall Street Journal implored, and the New York Times called the trip ‘misguided and empty.’” Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (Harper & Row, 1979), 300.

and fragmented. Helsinki emerged from this dual crisis—a product of mutual exhaustion as much as mutual aspiration.

This reversal of fortunes has generated a substantial historiography over the past quarter century. Daniel Thomas's *The Helsinki Effect* offered an influential constructivist interpretation, arguing that human rights norms established at Helsinki undermined Communist rule.³ Samuel Moyn's *The Last Utopia* and the edited volume *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* situated Helsinki within a broader transformation of political language.⁴ Michael Cotey Morgan's *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* provided the most comprehensive diplomatic history of the negotiations themselves, based on archival research in eight countries.⁵ German scholarship has emphasized the CSCE's roots in *Ostpolitik* and the strategy of "transformation through contacts," notably in Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart's edited volume *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*, a product of the Volkswagen-Stiftung research project at Mannheim.⁶ French scholarship has examined Paris's distinctive role, particularly Nicolas Badalassi's award-winning *En finir avec la guerre froide*, which traced French efforts to use the CSCE as a vehicle for overcoming the Cold War order.⁷ Finally, Sarah Snyder's *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War* documented the transnational networks connecting dissident groups with Western supporters.⁸

The volume under review, edited by Nicolas Badalassi and Sarah B. Snyder, builds upon this foundation while seeking to extend it in new directions.⁹ This review comes six years after the volume's publication, occasioned by the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Accords in August 2025 and the conference in The Histo-

3 = Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

4 = Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Harvard University Press, 2010); Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn, eds., *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

5 = Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

6 = Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart, eds., *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe* (Berghahn Books, 2008). See also Gottfried Niedhart, *Entspannung in Europa: Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Warschauer Pakt 1966 bis 1975* [Détente in Europe: The Federal Republic of Germany and the Warsaw Pact, 1966–1975] (Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014).

7 = Nicolas Badalassi, *En finir avec la guerre froide: La France, l'Europe et le processus d'Helsinki, 1965–1975* [Ending the Cold War: France, Europe and the Helsinki Process, 1965–1975] (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014).

8 = Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

9 = Nicolas Badalassi and Sarah B. Snyder, eds., *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War: Diplomacy, Societies and Human Rights, 1972–1990* (Berghahn Books, 2019).

rical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTI) that forms the basis of this thematic issue. Most recently, Kai Hebel published a monograph tracing Britain's pivotal contribution to the negotiations leading to the Final Act, demonstrating that scholarly interest in the Helsinki process remains very much alive.¹⁰ Bringing together scholars from Europe and North America, *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War* is organized around three thematic clusters: the role of diplomats and diplomacy in shaping the Helsinki process; transnational networks of human rights promotion and dissidence; and national case studies examining how individual states engaged with the CSCE framework. The editors frame the volume as an exploration of how the CSCE contributed to “overcoming the Westphalian system” by inserting human rights, cultural cooperation, and human contacts onto the international agenda—despite Soviet intentions to use the conference primarily for legitimizing existing borders. Notably, the editors explicitly criticize the “Kissingerization” of Cold War historiography—the tendency to write diplomatic history as the deeds of a handful of grand statesmen—and advocate instead for a bottom-up perspective attentive to the agency of mid-level diplomats, activists, and transnational networks.

= = = From the Networks of International Diplomacy to East and West Domestic Politics to Albanian Isolation

The volume's first section examines diplomacy and diplomats, with particular attention to agency and creativity within the negotiating process. Andrei Zagorski's opening chapter traces the evolution of the “human dimension” from 1975 to 1990, showing how the practice of raising individual human rights cases shifted from confidential bilateral channels to public “naming and shaming” after the Carter administration's policy turn at the Belgrade follow-up meeting. Despite this evolution, Zagorski notes that NGOs never gained direct access to the CSCE process; their influence remained mediated through Western governments, and the Human Dimension Mechanism (HDM) ultimately never granted individuals or organizations the right to submit complaints directly.

The chapter by Seth Brown and Angela Romano on diplomatic agency is among the volume's most methodologically innovative contributions. Drawing on the British and French cases, they argue that the 600-plus diplomats who negotiated the Final Act exercised significant autonomy, developing shared professional cultures through lengthy negotiations conducted in esoteric jargon and requiring consensus. Young British Foreign Office diplomats with linguistic skills operated with considerable leeway despite governmental skepticism, while French diplomat Jacques Chazelle's bilateral relationship with Soviet counterpart Yuri Dubinin proved crucial in breaking Basket III stalemates on information exchange. The authors advocate for a prosopographical approach to understanding diplomatic negotiations:

¹⁰ = = Kai Hebel, *Britain, Détente, and the Helsinki CSCE: 'Fathers of the Final Act'* (Routledge, 2025).

examining the shared characteristics, career trajectories, and socialization processes of negotiators as a distinct professional community.

Nicolas Badalassi's chapter on French diplomacy offers the volume's closest engagement with the intellectual context. He situates the French CSCE strategy within the broader landscape of 1970s French intellectual life: the "Solzhenitsyn affair," the emergence of the "new philosophers," and a diplomatic tradition reaching back to Talleyrand. French diplomats, led by Jacques Andréani, conceived of the CSCE as enabling an "anthropo-centred" Cold War diplomacy that placed human beings at the center of international relations. Their strategy emphasized the equality and interdependence of the Decalogue principles—placing human rights on equal footing with sovereignty—and promoted cultural cooperation as a potentially "corrosive" tool that might gradually transform Eastern societies. Stephan Kieninger's contribution on Max Kampelman examines how this "hard-nosed pacifist"—a World War II conscientious objector who later joined the Committee on Present Danger—navigated the Reagan administration's internal debates to achieve the Madrid Accord breakthrough despite the crisis of Polish martial law.

The volume's second section turns to transnational activism and dissidence. Elisabetta Vezzosi traces the Committee of Concerned Scientists (CCS), an organization of American academics defending Soviet colleagues, particularly Jewish "refuseniks": Soviet citizens, mostly Jews, whose applications to emigrate had been denied by authorities. The CCS grew to 4,000 members and created networks monitoring Helsinki compliance while engaging with Jackson-Vanik Amendment controversies. Christian Peterson's chapter challenges conventional narratives about the relationship between peace movements and human rights activism, examining groups like the Moscow Trust Group and the Campaign for Peace and Democracy—East and West that sought to bridge the divide between these causes. Jacek Czaputowicz contributes a distinctive personal perspective as a former Freedom and Peace Movement activist, describing how the Helsinki Final Act provided legitimacy for Central European opposition and facilitated cooperation with Western peace movements despite initial mutual mistrust.

Douglas Selvage's chapter on the limits of repression represents an important archival contribution, drawing on Warsaw Pact security service documents to show how the KGB and Stasi suppressed Helsinki monitoring groups but were ultimately constrained by their governments' need for Western economic assistance and arms control agreements. By 1980–82, organized dissent had been crushed across most of the Eastern bloc, including through martial law in Poland. Yet the security services failed to eliminate the transnational Helsinki network because Western actors continued their lobbying and Communist governments remained dependent on Western economic ties—a dynamic Selvage terms "transformation by linkage." Carl Bon Tempo's chapter examines the unexpected domestic applications of the Helsinki Final Act within the United States itself, showing how the National Association

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leveraged American human rights commitments abroad to demand attention to racial discrimination at home, and how immigration reformers invoked Final Act provisions on family reunification to advocate liberalizing U.S. immigration law. Together, Selvage's and Bon Tempo's contributions are particularly valuable as indicators of how foreign policy and diplomacy shaped—and were constrained by—domestic politics on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The third section presents national case studies. Maximilian Graf examines Austria's role as a neutral "diplomatic icebreaker" that maintained Western positions "in neutral clothes" while pursuing bilateral liberalization with Hungary and other Eastern neighbors—an approach that contributed to the speed of 1989's transformations, including Austria's facilitation of East German emigration. Anja Peter traces West German efforts to "save détente" during the early 1980s' superpower tensions, showing how Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher developed a comprehensive pan-European vision prioritizing dialogue over confrontation. Oliver Bange returns to analyze the often neglected military dimension of the CSCE and its connection to the human dimension, arguing that Soviet leaders under Gorbachev traded human rights concessions for security objectives in Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM) negotiations—a "sell-out" of societal security for military security, in the Stasi's view. Finally, Mëhill Kaba provides the first detailed analysis of why Albania remained the only European state outside the CSCE process, drawing on newly declassified Albanian archives to show that Tirana's rejection stemmed from ideological opposition and a recognition that internal stability required isolation, rather than primarily from Chinese pressure.

== Strengths and Further Perspectives

The CSCE and the End of the Cold War makes genuine contributions to our understanding of the Helsinki process. The prosopographical attention to diplomats as creative agents rather than mere executors of state policy opens productive new avenues for research. The transnational network analysis, building on Snyder's earlier work, demonstrates how non-state actors found multiple ways to engage with and influence the CSCE framework. Several chapters—particularly Selvage's work on security services and Kaba's on Albania—bring previously inaccessible archival materials into scholarly circulation. The volume successfully demonstrates that the Helsinki process unfolded across multiple sites and engaged a far wider range of actors than traditional diplomatic history has acknowledged.

Yet the volume largely bypasses what might be called the intellectual history of the Helsinki process. The conceptual and semantic dimensions of the CSCE—how key terms were contested, translated, and appropriated across different political cultures—remain underexplored. This is a significant lacuna. The Helsinki Final Act was, after all, a linguistic achievement: a carefully negotiated text whose

formulations were parsed, interpreted, and deployed by actors ranging from Soviet ideologists to Czech dissidents to American congressional staffers. How did concepts like “security,” “peaceful coexistence,” “human contacts,” or “sovereignty” carry different meanings and resonances for French diplomats steeped in Gaullist traditions, for Soviet negotiators working within Marxist-Leninist frameworks, and for Central European oppositionists drawing on phenomenological or personalist philosophy?

Badalassi’s chapter on French diplomacy gestures toward this dimension by situating CSCE strategy within the context of the “Solzhenitsyn Affair” and the rise of the “new philosophers,” but the connection remains suggestive rather than systematically developed. We learn that French diplomats conceived of their approach as “anthropo-centred,” but the intellectual genealogy of this concept—its relationship to French personalism, Catholic social thought, or existentialist humanism—is not traced. Similarly, the chapters on Central European dissidence acknowledge the importance of figures like Havel and Michnik but do not examine how these thinkers intellectually reworked Helsinki language within their own philosophical frameworks. Havel’s concept of “living in truth,” for instance, drew on Jan Patočka’s phenomenology and represented a distinctive appropriation of human rights discourse quite different from either Western liberal or Soviet socialist understandings—yet this conceptual transformation receives little attention.

A *Begriffsgeschichte* of the Helsinki process—tracing how key concepts were semantically contested during negotiations and subsequently appropriated across different contexts—would complement the diplomatic and social movement approaches that currently dominate the field. It is notable that the one systematic attempt at linguistic analysis of the Final Act—Giuseppe Mininni’s sociosemiotic study published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* in 1991—emerged from discourse analysis rather than from historical scholarship and has remained entirely isolated from CSCE historiography.¹¹ Such an intellectual history might examine how the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs” could be simultaneously invoked by Soviet diplomats defending their sphere of influence and by Western negotiators insisting that human rights violations were legitimate subjects of international concern. It might trace how “peaceful coexistence,” a concept with deep roots in Soviet ideological discourse going back to Lenin and codified by Khrushchev, was resignified through the Helsinki process into something quite different from its original meaning. And it might explore how dissident thinkers translated Helsinki

11 = = Giuseppe Mininni, “The Will to Peace: A Sociosemiotic Analysis of the Helsinki ‘Final Act,’” *Journal of Pragmatics* 15, no. 6 (1991): 465–86, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(91\)90049-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(91)90049-4). Mininni’s article analyzed the Final Act as diplomatic discourse, examining the “dia-text”—the dialectics of meaning generation—and the semantic contestation of concepts like “solidarity,” “equality,” and “justice.” The study emerged from a Vienna Centre research project but has had no discernible impact on historical scholarship.

language into local intellectual traditions: how Charter 77's invocation of the Final Act drew on specifically Czech philosophical resources, or how Polish opposition figures connected Helsinki norms to their own traditions of democratic thought.

The volume's focus on the period up to 1990 also means that longer-term questions about the Helsinki legacy remain unaddressed. How did the conceptual innovations of the CSCE process shape post-Cold War understandings of security, sovereignty, and human rights? The transformation of the CSCE into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the subsequent challenges to the "Helsinki order"—from the Yugoslav wars through the current crisis in European security—suggest that the conceptual tensions embedded in the Final Act were never fully resolved, merely deferred.

These critical observations should not obscure the volume's real achievements. Badalassi and Snyder have assembled a collection that significantly advances our understanding of how diplomacy, societies, and human rights interacted within the CSCE framework. The book will be essential reading for scholars of Cold War international history, human rights, and European integration. But it also points toward further work needed: a fuller engagement with intellectual history approaches that might illuminate not just what actors did but how they understood what they were doing, and how those understandings were shaped by—and in turn reshaped—the conceptual vocabularies available to them.

=== Literature ===

Badalassi, Nicolas. *En finir avec la guerre froide: La France, l'Europe et le processus d'Helsinki, 1965–1975* [Ending the Cold War: France, Europe and the Helsinki Process, 1965–1975]. Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014.

Badalassi, Nicolas, and Sarah B. Snyder, eds. *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War: Diplomacy, Societies and Human Rights, 1972–1990*. Berghahn Books, 2019.

Bange, Oliver, and Gottfried Niedhart, eds. *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*. Berghahn Books, 2008.

Eckel, Jan, and Samuel Moyn, eds. *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

Ford, Gerald R. *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford*. Harper & Row, 1979.

Hanhimäki, Jussi. “‘They Can Write it in Swahili’: Kissinger, the Soviets, and the Helsinki Accords, 1973–1975.” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 37–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794010308656791>.

Hebel, Kai. *Britain, Détente, and the Helsinki CSCE: ‘Fathers of the Final Act’*. Routledge, 2025.

Mininni, Giuseppe. “The Will to Peace: A Sociosemiotic Analysis of the Helsinki ‘Final Act’.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 15, no. 6 (1991): 465–86. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(91\)90049-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(91)90049-4).

Morgan, Michael Cotey. *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

Moyn, Samuel. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Harvard University Press, 2010.

Niedhart, Gottfried. *Entspannung in Europa: Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Warschauer Pakt 1966 bis 1975* [Détente in Europe: The Federal Republic of Germany and the Warsaw Pact, 1966–1975]. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014.

Snyder, Sarah B. “‘Jerry, Don’t Go’: Domestic Opposition to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.” *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 67–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991332>.

Snyder, Sarah B. *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Thomas, Daniel C. *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Keywords

=====

détente, diplomats, historical agency, human dimension, transnational history