Review article

Ostpolitik or *Westpolitik*?

British foreign policy, 1968–75

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By 1968, the Cold War balance was changing, perceptions were shifting, the old, hostile language of the Cold War was fading. Brezhnev was no Stalin. The Soviets had problems both with the United States, and with China. The Soviet Union's relative economic backwardness was increasingly well-known, and Western fears in the late 1950s of the Sputnik revolution and the possible economic predominance of the Soviet Union had disappeared. Despite its massive conventional forces, its East European empire remained a source of instability, which was only increased by the decision of the Chinese to send ambassadors to Eastern Europe in 1970. This was no 'empire by invitation', more a sullen acceptance of the status quo, which could easily flare up into dissent. Further, the Soviets still feared West German power.[1] In sum, '[t]he present collective leadership has long appeared to be uncertain, indecisive and "compromising" at home and, in foreign affairs, a prisoner, rather than instigator, of events, reacting to them rather than initiating them'.[2]

What was British policy between 1968 and 1975? By 1968, Britain's ranking as a world power was on the wane. Three vetoes by de Gaulle of British initiatives towards Europe (in 1958 of the free trade area proposal, in 1963 and in 1967), left it outside the European Communities (EC); retreat from empire, most recently east of Suez; and a major sterling crisis all reinforced the impression of decline. British GDP was now lower than that in France or West

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[1] *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series III, Volume I: *Britain and the Soviet Union, 1968–1972* (The Stationery Office, 1997), no. 31. (Henceforth, *DBPO*, III/I).

[2] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 15.

Germany, and its economic performance was characterized by the derogatory phrase 'Stop Go'. Britain's greatest assets remained its presence in West Germany and Berlin; its nuclear force which was deemed to keep it 'above the salt', although the signing of the Test Ban treaty in 1968 actually reduced British influence subsequently; and the chance to have the ear, from time to time, of the United States.[3]

Britain certainly cannot be called a revisionist power, in the sense that de Gaulle and Brandt were revisionists. The Cold War system suited British interests quite well, giving at least the illusion of influence at the top table, a direct interest in West Germany and Berlin, and an 'independent' voice in nuclear questions. The over-riding impression is that the number one priority in the late 1960s was for Britain to get into the EC, as 'our national interest is to develop our relations with Western rather than Eastern Europe.'[4] Indifference to integration in 1950 had turned to irritation by 1958, frustration and anger by 1963, and acute embarrassment by 1967. Britain clearly had to have the support of West Germany to get into the EC, even though success still looked remote while de Gaulle could call the shots.[5] There were few voices in Britain clamouring for a radical restructuring of the Cold War system: to ensure that Britain still had a 'say' was more important, and the fora for that were Western institutions: the EC, as well as NATO.

Relations with the Soviet Union thus were caught in a cleft stick. On the one hand, it was important to stay close to the United States and engineer a role as support and mediator, and a bridge to continental Europe. But, if relations between the superpowers got closer and Cold War tensions were reduced, either concerning third regions (the Middle East for example), or on arms limitations talks, the British would have less of a direct role. To deal directly and more or less independently with the Soviet Union had also been a traditional British policy—attempted by Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan, and indeed by Harold Wilson over Vietnam.[6] But the Soviet Union was hostile to Community enlargement, and saw it as another step in the creation of a vast capitalist and anti-Soviet enterprise. Moreover, the mindset of the early Cold War—based upon a worst-case analysis of the Soviets' foreign policy aims—still did, if any problem arose, quickly come to the fore. Thus, in practice, British policy towards the Soviets was now cast in terms of trade promotion, soft diplomacy, and information gathering, although 'we should also be careful not to appear to be running after them'.[7] There might be more scope with regard to the increasingly diverse countries of Eastern Europe, although 'we must be careful not to appear to be driving wedges between them and the Soviet Union'.[8] There was, at the same time, a sense that Britain was getting out of step with its European partners, as both France and West Germany had displayed a desire to pursue more active bilateral relations with the Soviet Union, while Britain remained the hard man of Western Europe.[9]

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[3] Elisabeth Barker, *Britain in a divided Europe, 1945-1970*, (London, Widenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), chapters 20–22; Brian White*, Britain, détente and changing East–West relations* (London: Routledge, 1992), chapter 6.

[4] *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 57; 60; 50 in which Thomas Brimelow minuted that the 'Soviet Government would like to see the countries of Western Europe disunited and bereft of any "framework" for collective action.'

[5] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 35(para 14). For Prime Minister Edward Heath's views on German foreign policy initiatives, and the 'bad bargain' that the Berlin Agreement represented, p. 377.

[6] *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 7; 8; 9. Wilson also paid two visits to Moscow.

[7] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 11. Goronwy Roberts MP, added, 'Utter clarity, bordering on crudity, pays with the Russians', ibid., fn. 9.

[8] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 11.

By 1975, the last year that these two volumes of documents cover, treaties between West Germany and the Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia had been agreed, as well as the Berlin Treaty; Britain had finally been admitted to the EC in January 1973; and the Helsinki Final Act had been signed by 35 countries, including both the Soviet Union and the United States.[10] The volumes concentrate on two themes: the first, bilateral Anglo-Soviet relations, and the second, Britain's role in the multilateral diplomacy that led up to the creation of the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the diplomacy that led to the Final Act. The two volumes are thus cleverly juxtaposed, and the second leads on neatly from the first. Although they are very different in emphasis, both show that British policy was conducted in a complex multilateral and multilevel context. While the first volume narrows down to focus on the rhythm of bilateral relations, the second reveals the ways in which Britain operated in a far more diffuse environment, for NATO and the Davignon process were the principal vehicles through which the British worked.[11] The following paragraphs will convey critically some of the colour and range of the documents, before their overall impact for scholars and practitioners is examined.

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In the summer of 1968, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia. This brutal action challenged British policy head on. Reproof but acceptance became the policy of the Labour government under Harold Wilson. The task of improving East–West relations had been set back, but it did not seem that war was in the offing in the east. 'This is not the action of strong "expansionist" leaders, but of frightened men reacting indecisively to a situation which they judged to be crucially dangerous, but with which they did not know how to deal.'[12] The Cabinet decided that '[t]here was at present a general understanding that the West would not intervene against the Soviet Union in Soviet bloc countries', although there 'would be advantage also in arrangements being made, for example by the Labour Party and the United Nations Association for public demonstrations to be held in this country in support of the Czech people and Government'.[13] Parliament was also recalled from its summer recess. By the end of the year, Ambassador Duncan Wilson was hoping that 'we can extract ourselves from the period of what the Soviet authorities call a "pause", and gradually resume the full range of contacts', although there had in fact been no strong Western response, and the worst that had happened was the cancellation of British ministerial visits. As in 1956, the Western powers had seen no opportunity, (or need?) to 'roll back' communism in Eastern Europe. Or, as Wilson said at the end of the year, there 'may later be doves and hawks in the Kremlin, but at present they are all crows.'[14] Very soon, diplomats were arguing that the Soviets feared that they had over-reacted by invading Czechoslovakia, and that Brezhnev had been put under considerable pressure in the aftermath of August 1968. It was estimated that the Soviets 'will probably now make an attempt to improve and tighten relations within the bloc. Whatever they do, disillusion with the Soviet Union will stimulate the interest of Eastern Europeans in the West.'[15] The imprint of Czechoslovakia was clear when preparations were begun for a conference on European security.

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[9] *DBPO*, III/1, no. 41. Denis Greenhill said that the UK was the 'most unpopular boy in the NATO school', fn. 11.

[10] Cmnd. 6932 (London: The Stationery Office, 1977), pp.225–83 for text.

[11] The Davignon Process came to be known as European Political Cooperation (EPC), and was an intergovernmental foreign policy coordination mechanism. Britain participated in this even before its entry into the EC.

[12] *DBPO*, III/1, no. 15.

[13] *DBPO*, III/1, no. 14.

But at the bilateral level, it was the intelligence issue that was to shape Anglo-Soviet bilateral relations over the following years. Espionage was seen as a real and growing problem. First, debates took place about how to secure the early release of the British lecturer, Gerald Brooke, whom the Soviets were anxious either to re-try or to 'trade' for the Krogers, jailed in Britain for spying and not due to be released until 1974.[16] Hardly had this been settled, than the intelligence issue returned with a vengeance. The Soviet Trade Delegation in particular were indulging in espionage, and were particularly anxious to secure information about the FCO and Ministry of Defence, Concorde, nuclear energy and computer electronics. In operation FOOT, 105 spies were sent home in September 1971.[17] Retaliatory action by the Soviets, and a temporary freezing over of relations were known to be inevitable, but before long, British diplomats were wondering how to ease the diplomatic impasse that they had created. The timing had, it would seem, been unfortunate, as preliminary discussions were already under way about a security conference, and there were fears that the British would be accused of trying to sabotage détente. Did the British overeact? On the face of it, it would seem as though they did. Prime Minister Heath advised that 'steps should be taken to cool things off', but despite the 'Indicators of Temperature' that were passed to and fro, and a suggestion that Julian Bullard give a 'performance' at the Moscow British Embassy Christmas party to try and improve relations it was not until March 1972 that Ambassador John Killick felt that he had 'a real feeling of returning to something approaching normal in business relations'.[18] There is also a sense that we have not yet got the full picture of this incident, including exactly why British diplomats got so exercised, and, indeed, what the levels of British activity in the Soviet Union were.[19] In any case, it was noted that 'things must never again be allowed to develop in such a way as to necessitate a similar operation on such a major scale'.[20] The European security talks proposal was a far more substantial issue for the two countries, as well as for the other potential participants.

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[14] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 22.

[15] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 31.

[16] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 30. In the Cabinet meeting, during a discussion about curtailing prison sentences, attention was drawn to the fact that this might raise the question of reducing the sentence of the great train robbers, imprisoned after the robbery in 1963. The inclusion of Cabinet material in these volumes gives a much richer picture, as well as serving as a reminder of the importance of the domestic context of day-to-day foreign policy making, *DBPO*, III/I, no. 34.

[17] *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 66; 70; 75.

The material in both volumes that covers the talks-about-talks phase of what was to become the Helsinki process is fascinating, and new. The idea of a European security conference had a long pedigree, stretching back to 1954. The Soviet idea had always been to exclude the Americans—wedge driving?—but by the late 1960s, the idea was gathering ground, with states moving in a 'curious crab-wise advance towards each other', spurred on by a Soviet desire to regain 'lost respectability', to secure the status quo, and perhaps to undermine the prospects of Community enlargement.[21] This was heralded by the Warsaw Pact's Declarations of March and October, 1969, and the response revealed American scepticism that bordered upon open hostility.[22] The origins of what has come to be known as the Helsinki process were hedged with provisos and conditions. The United States wished to complete the SALT talks, and have the MBFR talks; and there was also a desire to complete the talks on Berlin, which formed a key primary strategy in the West German policy of *Ostpolitik*, but the Warsaw Pact countries pushed forward with a suggestion, mediated by the Finns, for talks in Helsinki.[23]

There is not space here to track the progress of these talks. Like the Americans, the British were initially hostile. They feared either an aggressive détente that sought to split the West, or just a 'diplomacy of meaningless charades'; then, that the conference would be 'inevitable rather than desirable, and our primary aim defensive', despite the enthusiasm of our 'knock-kneed allies' (Crispin Tickell), or the 'wet front' of Belgium, Canada, Denmark and

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[18] *DBPO*, III/1, no. 91. John Dickie*, Inside the Foreign Office* (London: Chapmans, 1992), pp. 203–8, dates the return to 'normal' relations to 1973.

[19] However, it should be noted that the editors have been allowed full access to all FCO documents including Intelligence records, as well as Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office papers. Home Office and Department of Trade and Industry documents found in FCO files have also been used.

[20] *DBPO*, III/1, no. 84.

[21] Barker, *Britain in a divided Europe*, p. 279; *DBPO*, III/1, nos. 48; 50.

[22] *DBPO*, III/1, no. 26(fn. 2); p. 196; no. 48; *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series III, Volume II: *The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1972–1975* (The Stationery Office, 1997), nos. 6, 12. (henceforth, *DBPO*, III/II).

[23] *DBPO*, III/1, no. 39.

Norway, which believed the conference to be a 'Good Thing'.[24] As talks about talks progressed, some began to formulate a British national interest in a security conference. This adaptation, involving 'some pretty terrific volte-faces' is fascinating, and is another example of British reluctance to warm to others' proposals over Europe, until they had made them their own.[25] First, the talks might serve as a testing ground for the Davignon process, as well as a concerted NATO diplomatic exercise. Second, the British might, through the conference, be able to 'spread the contagion of liberty', reduce the application of the Brezhnev Doctrine, insist upon Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and issue linkage, and ensure that military aspects of security were not central to the agenda.[26] That the British provided the draft for the NATO steering brief for the preparatory talks also helped, as did an increasing sense that they could play a leading role in the talks.[27]

In Volume II the progress of the talks is described in considerable detail, and is summed up in the introduction.[28] For the historian, the use of the EPC mechanism is of particular interest. The British favoured the cheap and visible EPC, and certainly the Helsinki talks were characterized by a Western approach which involved each of NATO, EPC, and members of the European Commission, rather than ad hoc coalitions of individual states.[29] The volume covers the emergence of the four baskets for discussion; the deals and bargains; attempts to avoid talk focusing on the Mediterranean region; and the attitudes and machinations of other negotiating partners—for example, the French who 'fancy themselves as East/West bridge builders'.[30] The volume reflects the ennui and boredom amid the tension; contains some of the time-filling games on the part of British diplomats; and also reveals some of the antics of Dom Mintoff, climaxing with the improbable scenario of a potential Baltic/Mediterranean joust, with a senior Finnish official ready to hit the Maltese ambassador.[31]

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[24] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 35, but a view not shared by Ambassador Wilson; no. 46 (para 17); *DBPO*, III/II, nos. 3; 8, Foreign Minister PCJM Harmel is here credited with having invented detente; no. 2 (Tickell).

[25] *DBPO*, III/I, pp. 315–16 (Nicholas Henderson). The British came up with 'better' alternatives at the time of the Schuman Plan; with the free trade area at the time of Messina; tried to change the nature of the EEC with their 'conditional' application in 1961; and as Willy Brandt remarked, 'When I met George Brown he told me, "Willy, you must get us in [to the EC], so we can take the lead"', Willy Brandt, *My life in politics* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992), p. 420.

[26] *DBPO*, III/II, nos. 11; 5; 17; 9.

[27] *DBPO*, III/II, no. 17 (the NATO brief is not reproduced); T. A. K. Elliott: ' If Britain is not to act as a major European Power in the context of CSCE she can hardly hope to be a Power anywhere', no. 37.

[28] See also, Keith Hamilton, *The last cold warriors: Britain, détente and the CSCE, 1972–1975* (Oxford: European Interdependence Research Unit, St Antony's College, 1998) which covers the period of the volume, drawing principally from the documents under review.

[29] See also, Simon J. Nuttall, *European political cooperation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 58–66; *DBPO* III/II, nos. 37; 57.

[30] The baskets were: political and security matters; economic and related issues; human contacts, culture and information; the follow-up procedure; *DBPO* III/II, nos. 20; 107.

[31] *DBPO*, III/II, Appendix II will immortalize Michael Pakenham; no. 132. Domestic issues also appear, including the possible impact of the pressure that Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn were put under in Moscow.

The impact of the Helsinki process raises just one of a number of important questions discussed in these volumes. Supping with the devil is a hazardous business, especially when the menu is unclear, and it is impossible not to have a certain amount of sympathy for the doubters in Britain in 1970–71, yet admiration for their subsequent doggedness. Helsinki epitomised the tensions between a hard-line, zero-sum game approach, and a soft power approach to easing, if not changing the character of relations between European states in the Cold War. The documents extend only to 1975, without coverage of the follow-up sessions, so provide no immediate answers to the big question of the relationship between Helsinki and the end of the Cold War.[32] The 'second' Cold War dominated the late 1970s and early 1980s, so that the line of influence between Helsinki and 1989–91 is not a direct one. However, there is material in these documents that shows that some, if not all, of the British team came to see that exposure to Western values had to have a long-term impact upon Eastern Europe, and indeed the Soviet Union itself, even if some thought by 1975 that they had just been fighting the Cold War by 'other, more subtle means.'[33] Even if the Soviets had thought that Helsinki could become the peace treaty of the Second World War, in practice the process was used to lay out the wares of democracy, and to give encouragement to opposition groups in Eastern Europe. This provided at least a starting point for the destruction of an old system, and the emergence of a core of explicit 'Western' values for a post-Cold War European system.

The volumes also throw light on thinking, disagreements and policy formulation, and indeed on the rough and tumble of political life in Britain. They tantalize because of what they leave out, but nevertheless provide a wealth of new information and insights into British perceptions, policy-making, and indeed, into the culture of the FCO. For example, there are some long and detailed accounts both of British policy towards the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and of British estimates of Soviet foreign policy objectives.[34] One of the most interesting of these is a Joint Intelligence Committee report on the Soviet threat. In a world of Soviet antagonism qualified or masked by a tactical détente policy, bilateralism with the United States, and wedge-driving against the Western Alliance in the hope of ending the US defence cover, what should the British do? The threat was military, although it seemed as though the greater worry was that Britain's nuclear deterrent was being undermined by superpower bilateralism. The threat was also characterized by economic warfare, propaganda, espionage and subversion. But most serious was a fear that 'West European countries may come to attach greater importance to good bilateral relations with the Soviet Union than to building up Western Europe in political and defence terms', for while Soviet détente was an attacking policy, and US introversion was increasing, the Community had not 'developed any great momentum towards unity or towards development in the political and defence fields'.[35] Where were the West European powers prepared to increase their armaments?

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[32] Except for *DBPO*, III/II, Appendix III, 'The Belgrade CSCE Follow-Up Meeting', 13 March, 1978.

[33] *DBPO*, III/II, no. 37.

[34] *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 11; 22; 31; 40; 69; 78; 79; 89; 92.

Other insights are more personal, and the reports of Ambassador Wilson—a delight to read—are a particular novelty. Wilson wrote with a humility and a truly poetic touch about his cultural interests and his visits away from the Moscow heartland; he also took a much softer line about the Soviet Union than did policy-makers in Whitehall, being more sensitive to Soviet fears about Germany, and favouring a European security conference as early as 1969.[36] Indeed, he found himself so out of line that he felt obliged to fall on his sword in his valedictory dispatch.[37] His successor, John Killick was much tougher, and saw through operation FOOT, as well as the Helsinki talks.[38]

Another particularly good sub-theme is that of the two-yearly meetings of East European ambassadors, which give insights into life and politics of Eastern Europe.[39] In 1972, in their meeting with the secretary of state they pointed out with considerable prescience that, in Eastern Europe there was now a need to distinguish between regimes and populations, while also asking for more ministerial visits ('incurably dull', Alec Douglas-Home retorted). They were collectively chided for getting out of touch with FCO thinking 'notwithstanding the provision for annual leave'.[40]

What is the impact of these two volumes? They are both put together with great attention to detail and with a historical flair which is particularly apparent in the linking passages which both editors employ. The footnotes are as illuminating as they are voluminous. But the 'story line' approach, while making the volumes much more user-friendly, also raises questions for the scholarly researcher. One example will illustrate this dilemma. In 1969, the Soviet Union was not the main focus of British foreign policy at all. Thus the reader is left with tantalisingly little information about the extraordinary sequence of events of the early months of 1969: the Anglo-German declaration of February; Dennis Healey's 'bellicose' remarks on the early use of nuclear weapons and the capacity of NATO to sink the entire Soviet Mediterranean fleet within minutes of a war; an increase in British troop deployments in West Germany; the maladroit Soames affair; the temporary withdrawal of the French from WEU. President Nixon, who was visiting, would find 'Europe in a state of disarray', as Harold Wilson put it.[41] But there is only one major document (though plenty of footnotes) that deals with these events.[42]

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[35] *DBPO*, III/I, Appendix, September, 1972. The irony of the remark about the Community's development was presumably unintended.

[36] *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 65; 38; 72.

[37] *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 22; 23; 35(fn. 1); 36; 50; 57; 60. For his valedictory dispatch, ibid. no. 72. Leading Sovietologist Professor Archie Brown, has noted recently that he was reassured by this volume which made it clear that the FCO knew no more about how Soviet policy was made than did academics, 'Glasnost at the FCO', *Prospect*, July 1998, pp. 68-69.

[38] From Moscow, and then Whitehall. *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 95; 102; 104.

[39] *DBPO*, III/I, nos. 10; 46; 92; 95; *DBPO*, III/II, nos. 1; 5.

[40] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 95.

Much of the day-to-day detail of the CSCE talks is over-detailed, although perhaps a good indicator of what nuts and bolts diplomacy was (is?) actually like. Perhaps the volume should be essential reading for all those keen on a diplomatic career, or who wish to work in an international organisation. However, the volume leaves this reader frustrated, and with only part of the story. While access to EPC, and indeed to NATO documentation may have been beyond the editors' remit, once the documents are presented in a story line form, a demand for more material is inevitable, if only to be able to assess how significant the British role actually was.[43]

Having said this, the volumes are essential for scholars and practitioners alike.[44] Many of those whose minutes, dispatches and letters are in the volumes are still alive, and some of them—politicians and diplomats—graced the formidable launch seminar for the documents in the FCO in early 1998, and indeed were champing at the bit to re-run some of the contested areas covered by the documents. This is contemporary history at its best. But perhaps those who will find the documents most revealing are scholars and practitioners from east–central Europe and Russia itself. What will they make of Britain's '*Ostpolitik*'? Were not British relations with its Western partners more important than attempts to bring a thaw? Could decision-makers see beyond the status quo? It is to be hoped that this publication will encourage the publication of other European documents in similar form. The decision by the editors of *Documents on British Policy Overseas* to return to the practice adopted after the First World War, in which document releases were not confined to a thirty- or fifty-year rule, presents a perfect occasion for a pan-European investigation of these charged and significant years in which the European powers led on an initiative through which new modes of intra and inter-state behaviour were laid down, modes which now form a fundamental part of the international politics of post-Cold War Europe.

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[41] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 25; Harold Wilson, *The Labour government, 1964–1970* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 768–79.

[42] *DBPO*, III/I, no. 25.

[43] In a world where diplomacy and international organizations go hand in hand, historians cannot ask too many times for the early release of institutional documents, and this is another clear example of such a need. See, Beatrice Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG: nuclear strategies and forces for Europe, 1949–2000* (London: Macmillan, 1997), who secured declassification of much NATO documentation.

[44] For some of the particular ways in which both historians and political scientists can use such documentary material, see Anne Deighton, 'Say it with documents: British policy overseas, 1945–1952', *Review of International Studies*, 18, 1992, pp. 393–402, a review article on ten volumes in the *DBPO* Series I and Series II.