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Wikimedia / National Archives and Records Administration 1 August 1975 – from Bern to

A historic signing marathon: on 1 August 1975, the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was

Helsinki Back in 1975, on Swiss National Day of all days, Switzerland's president Pierre Graber

signed the Helsinki Final Act (also known as the Helsinki Accords), concluding the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in the Finnish capital. It marked an easing of tensions in the midst of the Cold War. Thomas Bürgisser →



signed.

Thomas Bürgisser is a historian at the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) research centre.

Confederacy was first celebrated on 1 August 1891 to mark the country's 600th anniversary. While historians doubt that this document is actually Switzerland's founding Charter, 1 August has been an official public holiday since 1994 and is a special date and occasion for extensive festivities, fireworks and speeches on Swiss political identity.

ased on a Federal Charter dated 1 August 1291, the founding of the



on Rütli meadow, but in a modern conference centre designed by Alvar Aalto, on the edge of Töölö Bay, in the heart of the Finnish capital Helsinki. It was there, exactly 50 years ago, on Swiss National Day, that Swiss President Pierre Graber was one of 35 heads of state

and government to sign the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the CSCE Final Act. The Tribune de Genève dubbed this date 'one of the best Swiss National Days in ages' in view of the ceremonial signing of the agreement, which the newspaper interpreted as a signal from the Federal Council of Switzerland's greater openness to the world and involvement in foreign policy. The Helsinki Final Act is indeed a remarkable document. Getting the representatives of all European countries from East and West – including the Soviet Union and the United States and Canada - to come to the negotiating table, invoke

shared values and undertake to adhere to the same rules in the middle of the Cold War

was indeed no mean feat.

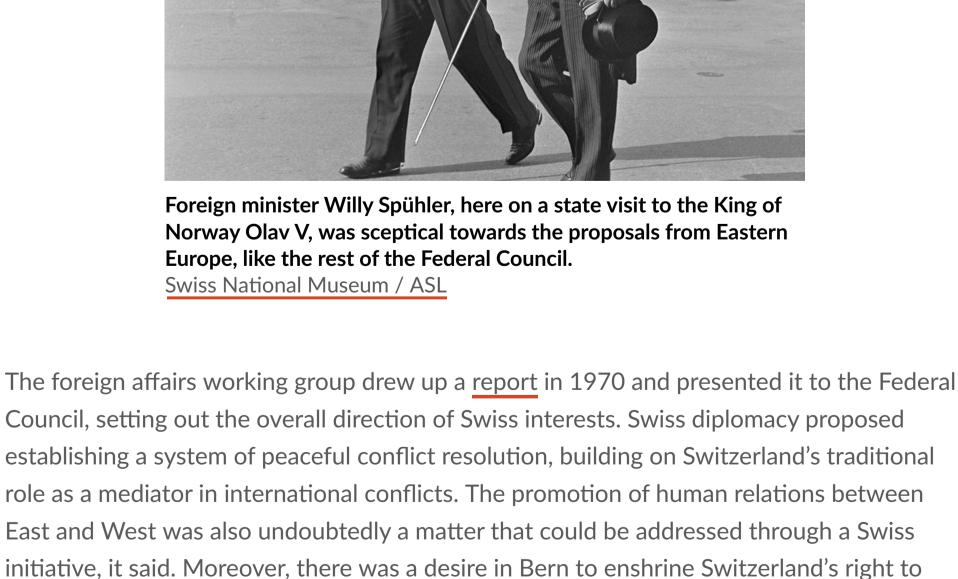
Helsinki Final Act, August 01, 1975 Partager



Federal Council said that it was "not convinced of the sincerity of the Soviets' desire for détente, and even less of their ability to make concessions." A foreign affairs working group set up by the Federal Council also suspected that Moscow's proposal was primarily a propaganda exercise. They believed that Russia wanted to play peacemaker, cement the status quo in Eastern Europe, sow the seeds of discord among its rivals, and counteract an excessive concentration of economic power in the West. "Deep distrust is therefore justified," warned diplomats. The subsequent months showed that despite all this scepticism, there was an overriding interest in the convening of a conference. Both in the West and in the East, governments hoped that discussing multilateral security issues would improve the situation on the Continent. The members of

the European Community, NATO, and the neutral and non-aligned countries therefore put

forward sometimes diverging demands, and even the Eastern Bloc appeared less intractable than expected.



After the initial declarations of intent from capitals across Europe, there followed two years of mutual exploratory talks and consultations spanning the whole continent. The Swiss foreign minister and his chief officials also took part in this round of visits, stepping up receptions of foreign officials in Bern and increasing their trips abroad to an almost unthinkable level by Swiss standards at the time. The most lively discussions took place with the other neutral states - as "views in Sweden and Austria largely align with our own". But Swiss diplomats even found the novel exchange of ideas with the countries behind the Iron Curtain to be surprisingly fruitful.

In November 1972, the multilateral preliminary negotiations finally got under way at the

organisational and content-related guidelines for the conduct of the main negotiations -

including the central consensus principle. Once this phase was complete, the foreign

ministers from the participating states met in the Finnish capital for the first time.

Dipoli congress centre near Helsinki. For six months, the 35 delegations carried out

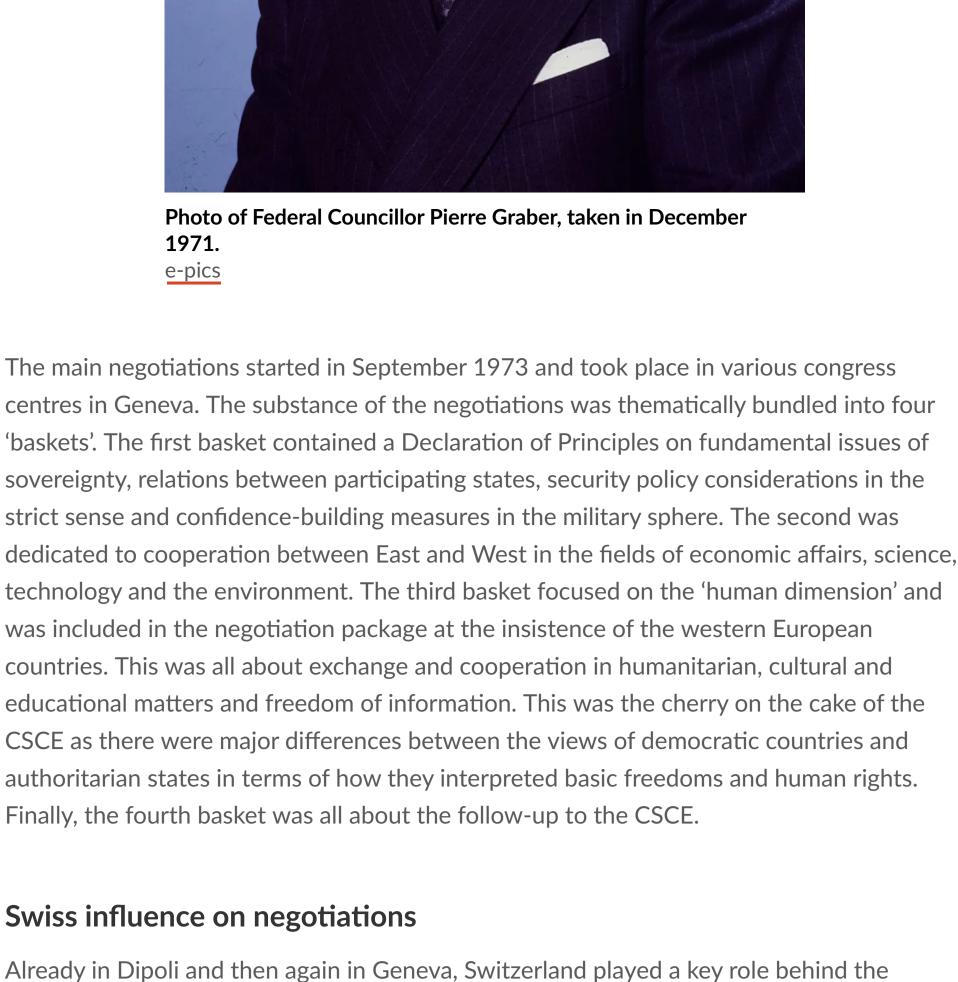
painstaking diplomatic work to compile the conference agenda and set out the

neutrality at the conference. And finally, as a sign of its availability to perform 'good offices',

Switzerland offered Geneva as a potential venue for the negotiations.

Switzerland was represented by Federal Councillor Pierre Graber.

Six months to put together a conference agenda



scenes. It carried out important mediation services together with the other neutral states

Liechtenstein. Naturally, this always required a fundamental willingness to compromise on

the part of the two superpowers. But when the discussions became so deadlocked that

neither camp could put forward or accept compromises without losing face, proposals

Austria, Sweden and Finland - and from 1974 as the 'N+N group' of neutral and non-

aligned states with Yugoslavia and the small states Cyprus, Malta, San Marino and

were brought forward via the N+N channel. At these key moments, the Swiss diplomats helped to unblock the negotiations and ultimately to reach an outcome that was acceptable to all.

Sicherheitskonferenz

Schweizer Entwurf vor der

Das Sonderarbeitsorgan der Konferenz für Sicherheit und Zusammenarbeit (KSZE) hat am Dienstag in Genf drei Projekte beraten: den Schweizer Vorschlag zur friedlichen Lösung von Konflikten sowie einen rumänischen und einen sowjetischen Entwurf über Gewaltverzicht. Der Schweizer Entwurf unterscheidet zwei Arten internationaler Konflikte. Die einen können durch Anwendung des bestehenden Völkerrechts beigelegt werden; die anderen bedürfen der Schaffung neuer Rechtsnormen, da die in Frage stehenden Parteien das bestehende Völkerrecht nicht anerkennen. Die Konflikte der ersterwähnten Art würden von einem Schiedsgericht entschieden, dessen Urteil Gesetzeskraft besässe. Die andern

Konflikte würden einer Untersuchungskom-

mission unterbreitet, die eine Schlichtung

anstreben und beiden Parteien einen Kom-

promiss vorschlagen würde. Dieser hätte al-

Alle Staaten, die sich dem von der Schweiz

entworfenen System anschlössen, könnten

sich am Schiedsgericht und an der Untersu-

chungskommission beteiligen. Diese Organe

würden auf Antrag eines Mitgliedstaates in

Aktion treten. Der fragliche Staat müsste

sich der jeweils geltenden Prozedur unter-

Article from the Burgdorfer Tagblatt on the work of Switzerland in

lerdings nicht Gesetzeskraft.

werfen.

the CSCE negotiations in Geneva, September 1973. e-newspaperarchives Following months of editing and wrangling over wording, the CSCE Final Act was finally ready to be signed in the summer of 1975. Broadly speaking, the main trade-off was the fact that the Soviet Union and its allies were able to assert their territorial sovereignty and the inviolability of their borders in the 80-page document, while the West managed to extract concessions from the Eastern Bloc on the respect of human rights. The path was then clear for the 1 August 1975 in Helsinki.



In fact, the Helsinki Final Act was not a legally binding instrument under international law, but a binding 'code of conduct' for the signatory states to shape intergovernmental relations on the Continent. However, as the only pan-European set of rules, it can be seen as the greatest achievement of European diplomacy during the Cold War. Despite all the tribulations, the CSCE remained a forum for dialogue between East and West up until the collapse of the Iron Curtain. At follow-up conferences, adherence to the Helsinki principles

was reviewed and expanded upon. Following the democratic overturning of the communist

regimes, the CSCE Special Summit was held in Paris in 1990 to establish the outcomes of

the transition and usher in a new era of pan-European cooperation. Ultimately, at the

Soviet head of state Leonid Brezhnev (centre) and US President Gerald Ford (right) raise their glasses to the signed CSCE Final Act. A

photo that would not have been possible a few years earlier.

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Joint research

organisation's Budapest Summit in 1994, the CSCE was renamed the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Up until 2022, the OSCE consistently had a role to play in conflict situations. But Russia's attack on Ukraine has left the legacy of Helsinki in tatters. Switzerland, which was not a member of the UN or the European Community, was able to play a part in the CSCE process for the first time as an independent and roundly respected player on key issues, and help shape pan-European policy. The CSCE marked a move away from Swiss exceptionalism and therefore the beginning of a normalisation of Swiss foreign policy. In 1996 and 2014, Switzerland played a key role as OSCE Chair - and it is set to chair the organisation again in 2026. Maybe one day the OSCE can again become an instrument for a pan-European security policy based on the sovereign equality of all states. In that case, the 1 August 1975 really would have been one of the best Swiss National Days ever.

This text is the product of collaboration between the Swiss National Museum and

the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) research centre. Inspired by the

Chairmanship in 2026, Dodis is currently conducting research for two publications

on the history of the CSCE/OSCE. The documents cited in the text and numerous

50th anniversary of the CSCE Helsinki Final Act and Switzerland's OSCE

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other files on the subject are available online.