In *Reconciliation Road*, Benedikt Schoenborn offers a “a new scholarly approach to Ostpolitik” (196) by placing the concept of “reconciliation” at the center of his study of Ostpolitik (Eastern Policy), Willy Brandt’s signature foreign policy initiative. Schoenborn sees “reconciliation with the peoples of Eastern Europe” as one of the “three main points” of Brandt’s Ostpolitik, along with a “West German contribution to relaxing Cold War tensions” and a “policy of small steps” that worked towards German reunification (1). According to Schoenborn, “the overwhelming majority of historical and political accounts” focus on the formal political aspects of Ostpolitik, but the unfolding of “reconciliation” remains an essential element that “has attracted much less attention” (1, 196).

Schoenborn notes that in structure and appearance this is “primarily a work of history and uses style and methodologies from historical research” (6). According to the author, the book’s originality lies in its “introducing theoretical notions of reconciliation from peace and conflict studies” into this historical review “to add a new layer of interpretation to the scholarly analysis of Ostpolitik” (6). He argues that this exercise will “contribute fresh theoretical elements to historical research” on Ostpolitik and conversely will “provide a concrete example of reconciliation policy for the field of peace and conflict studies, which tends to emphasize theory-driven and normative research on reconciliation” (6). Elsewhere Schoenborn speaks of “developing a novel interpretation of Ostpolitik” and “distinguishing elements of reconciliation in Willy Brandt’s policy” (21).

Schoenborn’s main argument arising from this hybrid methodology is that Brandt’s Ostpolitik “was a policy of reconciliation” that is now more easily recognizable as such. Since reconciliation as a distinct phenomenon has developed its own concepts and vocabulary within peace and conflict studies, we can see that “from the academic viewpoint” Brandt’s Ostpolitik was “consistent with today’s scholarly approaches to reconciliation” (6).

Schoenborn’s first chapter (17-30) unpacks some essential concepts of reconciliation from peace and conflict studies that he uses throughout the book to analyze Brandt’s Ostpolitik. Schoenborn uses Andrew Schaap’s landmark study from 2005, *Political Reconciliation*, as the “theoretical guideline” (7) and “theoretical point of reference” (21) for understanding what reconciliation means.1 Schoenborn cites Schaap’s summary statement that “political reconciliation begins with the invocation of a ‘we’ that is not yet” (21). From John Paul Lederach, Schoenborn borrows a “pyramid” of social actors fostering reconciliation processes at three

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1 Andrew Schaap, *Political Reconciliation* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2005)
distinct levels: highest-ranked leaders, middle-range leaders, and grassroots level. Schoenborn also employs David Crocker’s spectrum of reconciliation ranging from the “thin” reconciliation of simple coexistence to the “thick” reconciliation of rebuilding “social bonds, mutual healing, and a shared vision for the future” (26). This chapter could be profitably read as a very short introduction to the field of reconciliation studies.

The next four chapters trace Brandt’s evolving Ostpolitik from its origins in the mid-1950s until Brandt’s death nearly four decades later in 1992. The political narrative is punctuated by points of analysis using the concepts and vocabulary of reconciliation introduced above. For example, in chapter 2, Brandt’s time as mayor of West Berlin is described as “the first step—coexistence” (31) and the text explicates Brandt’s work in building contacts with Soviet diplomats at the mid-range level and facilitating family reunifications at the grassroots level. Chapter 3 covers Brandt’s time as foreign minister in the coalition government headed by Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) from December 1966 to October 1969, when Brandt first began to discuss reconciliation in public as he made ice-breaking visits to Bucharest and Belgrade. Chapter 4 examines the first part of Brandt’s chancellorship, from October 1969 to late 1971 when Brandt was at “the zenith of his career as a politician, characterized by his groundbreaking summit meetings with Soviet, Polish, and East German leaders” (12). That chapter discusses summit meetings and “the roles played by top leaders” (12) and includes discussion of Brandt’s famous Kniefall (knee fall) in front of the Warsaw Ghetto memorial on 07 December 1970 (106-114). Schoenborn argues “only the highest political leaders could perform such a dramatic act” (111) which supports the larger observation that “the role of top-level leaders in the forming of a novel policy is particularly significant during the first stage” (92) In sum, “for the creation of a policy of reconciliation towards the East, Brandt’s persona was most decisive in the first two years of his chancellorship” (92). Chapter 5 covers the period from late 1971 to end of Brandt’s chancellorship in May 1974. Here the focus is on “the objective of Ostpolitik to set in motion reconciliation at lower levels” by generating and institutionalizing East-West networks at the middle-range and grassroots levels” (13). Chapter 6 explores Brandt’s legacy as an inspirational elder statesman of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) which he chaired until 1987 and in the Socialist International, where he served as president from 1976 to 1992. Brandt’s iconic status continues to inspire biographies, including several notable works from the past decade.4

By emphasizing the role of top leaders in the early phases of reconciliation, Schoenborn can justify the book’s nearly exclusive focus on Willy Brandt and Brandt’s persona. None of the other leading figures associated with Ostpolitik gets much space in this account. Egon Bahr, Brandt’s closest associate during these events, is generally reduced to a negotiator or a document drafter—an executor of policy decisions, but not a visionary like Brandt. Helmut Schmidt, who followed Brandt as chancellor until 1982, is barely mentioned, although he was crucial in extending Brandt’s policies of signing energy, trade, and economic agreements with the Soviet Union.5 Although Schoenborn discusses the importance of these long-term mid-levels contacts, they are all dependent on and subsequent to the reconciliation efforts initiated by top leaders.

Schoenborn’s argument that “reconciliation” was a sine qua non for Brandt’s execution of Ostpolitik is convincing. More debatable are Schoenborn’s larger claims that Ostpolitik was “successful” (8) or “an unprecedented success” (93) when the terms for that kind of larger judgment are only vaguely expressed as “beneficial for Germany and the political developments in Europe” (8). No doubt Brandt improved the

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Federal Republic’s diplomatic position by opening substantive communication with Romania, the Soviet Union, Poland, the German Democratic Republic, and Czechoslovakia. But were these initiatives “an integral part” of the successful conclusion of the SALT I Treaty in May 1972 or the four-power Berlin Agreement in May 1971 (93) as Schoenborn claims? Maybe, but the relationship is not as simple and direct as Schoenborn asserts. Similarly, the claim that Ostpolitik “accomplished pivotal groundwork” (13) and “crucial groundwork” (172) for the Helsinki conference and the Final Act of 1975 is certainly defensible, but this volume of 236 pages is not in a position to prove the point. More debatable is the claim “that detente and Ostpolitik contributed to the gradual erosion of the legitimacy of the Eastern system” and that it would be “implausible” not to see a connection between “Brandt’s Ostpolitik and the end of the Cold War” (202).

Schoenborn argues Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms “seemed like an indirect corollary to Brandt’s earlier endeavor to encourage gradual transformation” (14) and that even the end of the Cold War “manifested analogies with Brandt’s expectation” for a dissolution of the Soviet bloc (14). Although these are all interesting and perhaps reasonable conjectures, they seem like overreach because the book does not provide the discussion or evidentiary support that is needed to bolster these claims.

Schoenborn discusses three waves of criticism directed against Ostpolitik as implemented by Brandt and as continued by successive German governments under chancellors Helmut Schmidt (1974–1982), Helmut Kohl (1983–1998), Gerhard Schroeder (1998–2005) and Angela Merkel (2005–2021). Schoenborn generally dismisses the first wave of early objections to Ostpolitik that came from German conservatives in the 1960s and 1970s. Conservative objections lost validity when Helmut Kohl’s Christian Democrats (CDU) continued the Brandt-Schmidt-SPD line of Ostpolitik through the 1980s. According to Schoenborn the initial objections to dealing with the Soviet bloc states also “lost their substance with the end of the Cold war” (201).

Schoenborn acknowledges a second wave of criticism arising in the later 1970s and 1980s when East European dissidents and human rights advocates criticized the Federal Republic and Brandt personally for not supporting East European dissident figures and popular impulses for more freedom in the Soviet Bloc. The most visible tensions arose when Brandt refused to publicly support the Solidarity trade union in Poland, refused to support sanctions on the Polish regime of general Wojciech Jaruzelski after the imposition of martial law in December 1981, and refused to meet with Solidarity leader Lech Walesa during a December 1985 visit to Warsaw to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the Warsaw Treaty. The public reaction across Europe was scathing (174–179). Criticisms that German foreign policy remained too attached to Ostpolitik resurfaced as a third wave of criticism after the Russian annexation of Crimea and parts of the Ukraine in 2014 as Chancellor Merkel’s CDU-SPD coalition government clung to the status quo of Ostpolitik despite Russia’s obvious violations of human rights and international law.

Because the book was published in 2020, Schoenborn was unable to record the intellectual, political, and spiritual death of Ostpolitik that came with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This is not the place to unpack the many political changes that have affected Germany since the Russian invasion in February 2022. Certainly none of those developments has been as swift and complete as the renunciation and disavowal of Ostpolitik among German political leaders, and particularly among leading figures of the SPD. Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s “Zeitenwende” (turning point) speech of 27 February 2022 announced a radical new departure in foreign relations and defense policy regarding Russia; this was a de facto admission that Ostpolitik was over. Other leading figures from the SPD have gone even further, implying or openly stating that Ostpolitik had been a mistake. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, SPD party chairman Lars Klingbeil, and parliamentary leader Rolf Mützenich have all publicly admitted mistakes in hoping the long-term ties of Ostpolitik could contain Putin’s ambitions.6 Fittingly perhaps, it fell to Brandt’s son, Peter,

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an historian and professor emeritus, to organize a few of the older generation of Social Democrats to defend the spirit of Ostpolitik in a somewhat tone-deaf appeal to Chancellor Scholz to press for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.7

But does the current anti-Ostpolitik backlash go too far? After all, during its roughly fifty years of existence, Ostpolitik really did build an extensive network of top-level, mid-range, and grassroots connections that surely served to restrain Soviet and post-Soviet Russian foreign policies while providing Germany with some badly needed energy alternatives. Both politically and economically, Ostpolitik served Germany well for several decades. Do we call fifty years of peace and prosperity for Germany a failure because the Ostpolitik relationship left the Germans (and most others) unprepared for Putin’s surprising gamble on the Ukraine? That seems too harsh. French President Emmanuel Macron is now admitting mistakes in French policies toward Russia, which were very different from Germany’s approach.8 Ostpolitik was only one strand in a complex web of Western policies, connections, and warnings to Russia, none of which were able to dissuade Putin from invading Ukraine.

When the current war in Ukraine is over, few will be looking to resurrect Germany’s Ostpolitik in its entirety, but a reconciliation of some type between Russia and the West will be badly needed. That certainly will be difficult, but perhaps not more difficult than Brandt’s post-Nazi German reconciliation with Eastern Europe appeared in the 1950s. Maybe the parties involved in negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine can revisit some of Brandt’s creative thinking and personal gestures as inspiring examples for the beginnings of a new reconciliation. They can use Benedikt Schoenborn’s excellent study of reconciliation and Ostpolitik as their guide.

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