

Hans Dietrich Genscher – Cold War Communicator

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No foreign minister has left his mark on the history of the Federal Republic of Germany as Hans-Dietrich Genscher did. Having fled his hometown Halle an der Saale to West Germany in 1952, he began a meteoric career within the liberal FDP and was appointed interior minister under Willy Brandt in the first SPD-FDP governing coalition. Following Brandt's resignation in the wake of the Günter Guillaume espionage affair, Genscher switched portfolios to become foreign minister, an office he would hold for eighteen years. There, against the backdrop of the Cold War, he shaped West German policy on the global political stage and, as a diplomatic trailblazer, played an essential part in the political architecture of German reunification.

One might ask, however, how Genscher managed to stay in power so long beyond his party's political defection that made Helmut Kohl chancellor in 1982. Three factors were key: Firstly, after taking the foreign minister's post in 1974 he turned the Foreign Office into an organizational and political power base that became more and more tailored to his needs. With his painstaking attention to detail and shrewd manner of negotiating he rapidly won the respect of diplomats abroad and at home.



Secondly, the FDP – the party he also led between 1974 and 1985 – became his base of power within West Germany's parliamentary system. Though never uncontroversial, he remained his party's most influential figurehead. The fortunes of the FDP rose and fell with his own successes. In the watershed year of 1982, when the FDP switched alliances to bring down the SPD-led government of Helmut Schmidt, Genscher became the kingmaker that brought Kohl to power in a new center-right coalition. He took a huge risk in doing so, plunging the FDP into its hitherto greatest crisis.

A third and decisive factor was the [mediatization](#) of foreign policy under his leadership. The Foreign Office's press department was institutionally, strategically and financially beefed up and adapted its work to the changing radio and television environment. Using professional publicity work focused personally on the foreign minister and countless, strategically placed interviews in newspapers, radio and television, Genscher achieved an omnipresence in the media that remains legendary today.

Working from these three pillars of the "[Genscher System](#)" that formed the basis of his long and successful tenure, Genscher the West German chief diplomat evolved into Genscher the roving communicator and networker in the Cold War. The policy of de-escalation with the states of the Warsaw Pact that he called thoroughly "realistic" became his passion. In the tradition of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik, Genscher grasped the East-West divide not as an obstacle but simply as the unchanging



starting point for negotiations with Moscow. For him, détente was a process of communication that could unfold an energizing effect during stable periods of global politics and a de-escalating one in times of crisis... and in both respects, play a significant part in securing peace. For him, the foundation for any agreement was a minimum of trust in the reliability of one's negotiating partner – a minimum he sought to establish through policies of intensive dialogue and shuttle diplomacy.

Following this logic in crises, e.g. the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the 1981 proclamation of martial law in Poland and the conflict surrounding the NATO Double-Track Decision, he pursued talks with the Kremlin with singular intensity and stubbornness. However, his negotiating style was marked by a high degree of empathy that respected the opposing side's interests and, from this basis, sought common ground and the offsetting of divergent positions. Working from sober compensation of interests and dismantling of ideology over the longer term, this pragmatic approach certainly had its price. Genscher's priority was to start talking to those in power, regardless of whether they were democratically elected or not.

His greatest achievement on the global stage was without a doubt the Two-Plus-Four Treaty on reestablishing Germany's external unity, for which he as foreign minister bore responsibility. Beyond this epochal deed his legacy to foreign policy has been, in times of international, peace-imperiling crises, to intensify communication between conflict parties along all possible channels instead of breaking these ties.



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