

## Helsinki Final Act, 1975

**Name:** Helsinki Final Act

**Adoption:** Signature of the Act on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1975.

**Entry into force:** Not legally binding; does not have treaty status.

**Number of signatories and ratifications:** The Helsinki Final Act was signed by 35 nations. The United States, Canada, and every European country, except Albania, signed the Act.

**Canada's commitments:** Canada has signed the Act.

### Summary information

The Helsinki Final Act is the concluding document of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which started at Helsinki on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1973, continued at Geneva from September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1973 to July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1975, and finally concluding at Helsinki on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1975.

One of the main motivations of the Conference was to improve and intensify the signatory State's relations in order to contribute to Europe's peace, security, justice and cooperation by creating rapprochement among themselves and with non-signatory States.

The Helsinki Final Act was signed by 35 nations, including the United States, Canada, and every European country, except Albania.

### History

The Helsinki Final Act is set within the context of the Cold War discussions between the Soviet Union, the European countries, and the Western leaders, such as the United States and Canada.

The initial call for the Helsinki Conference was made in 1954 by the Soviet Union with the intention of establishing the formal recognition of the political boundaries in Eastern Europe. No progress on these discussions was made through the 1950s and 1960s, mostly because the United States and other Western nations feared it might strengthen the Soviet position and the communist expansion.

In the early 1970s, negotiations were reconsidered due to a shift towards détente, a period of release tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. This period was characterized by an increase in trade and cooperation between the two leaders, which allowed for the signing of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) treaties and the Helsinki Final Act.

While the SALT treaties were focused more on the negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union to restrain the arms race for strategic missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons, the Helsinki Final Act was a more encompassing agreement dealing with a variety of issues. The Helsinki Final Act is commonly divided in four “baskets” to represent the distinct sets of principles agreed on, from political and military issues, to economic and scientific cooperation, to human rights protection, and finally the implementation process.

The multifaceted Act had a far-reaching effect on the Cold War and US-Soviet relations. The boundaries concession made by Western leaders resulted in the formal recognition of the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which reinforced the Soviet domination on Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, the human rights principles embedded in the third basket allowed for a monitoring process in regards to the strong dissidence present within the Soviet Union.

## **Key Provisions**

The Helsinki Final Act is based on a few preconditions relating to security in Europe in order to promote better relations among signatory States and ensure conditions of true and lasting peace. First, the concept of *détente* is used to portray the important process of the release of tensions in relation to the hostilities of the Cold War. The Helsinki Final Act is based on the recognition of the common history of European nations while also taking into account the diversity of positions and views in order to create a favourable setting for mutual interest. It also recognizes the indivisibility of security in Europe and the close link between peace and security through the promotion of fundamental rights, economic and social process and well-being for all peoples. Finally, the Helsinki Final Act is based on the reaffirmation of the full and active support of the United Nations in common adherence to the principle in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.

The Helsinki Final Act is commonly divided in four “baskets” covering different sets of issues. The first basket presents 10 principles in relation to political and security issues:

- I. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty
- II. Refraining from the threat or use of force
- III. Inviolability of frontiers
- IV. Territorial integrity of States
- V. Peaceful settlement of disputes
- VI. Non-intervention in internal affairs
- VII. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
- VIII. Equal rights and self-determination of peoples
- IX. Co-operation among States
- X. Fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law

The second basket focuses on trade, scientific, and environmental cooperation, while the third basket covers issues such as human rights, cultural exchanges, and freedom of the press. Finally, the fourth basket gives the details for follow-up meetings and implementation procedures.

### **Canada's commitments and responsibilities**

While Canada was part of the signatories of the Helsinki Final Act, it did not involve itself to the same extent as other main leaders such as the United States and Germany. Nonetheless, Canada was able to host a follow-up meeting in Ottawa in 1985 and established a Canadian Parliamentary Helsinki Group On July 14, 1977. The first chairman of the Group was the Honourable Robert Stanbury, then the MP for York-Scarborough, and formerly Minister of National Revenue. The mandate of the Canadian Parliamentary Helsinki Group was to “study, discuss and keep up-to-date on development relating to the Helsinki Final Act”.

Considering that many Canadian MPs had to represent citizens of East European heritage, one of the main concerns of the Group relating to the principles of the Helsinki Final Act was the issue of family reunification. The Group thus held meetings in order to take testimonies from various Eastern European and political and religious dissidents. The ad hoc committee also ensured dialogue with officials of the Department of External Affairs who could provide insights on the Helsinki negotiating process.

The Canadian Parliamentary Helsinki Group continued its work throughout the years with more or less constant presence at least until the Madrid Review Conference in 1980, where its mandate was expanded not only to the monitoring of human rights issues, but also to the “problems of East-West economic relations, as well as questions associated with disarmament and the reduction of military tensions”.

### **International monitoring and implementation**

Helsinki Monitoring Groups were created in the Soviet Union and across Europe to monitor the progress of the third basket implementation on human rights and freedoms protection. Mainly in East European countries, Helsinki “watch committees” were established not only to monitor the implementation of the Act, but also as an activist entity to publish and protest against certain breaches.

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) organized several follow-up meetings in Belgrade in 1977-78, in Madrid in 1980-83, and Vienna in 1986-89. During the Belgrade meeting, a review process was introduced to hold those who violate the principles of the Helsinki Final Act accountable. In addition, the Vienna meeting allowed for the recognition of the rights of emigration and religious freedom, which then had a beneficial effect on opening ties between Eastern and Western Europe. It also brought a new series of CSCE conferences on the concept of Human

Dimension, which contributed to major political and social changes in Europe. All these new implementations allowed a shift in the political paradigm towards the end of the Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe and, ultimately, an end to the Cold War.

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was renamed the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1994 due to the expanded role of the organization.

## **References**

Canadian Parliamentary Review  
The Canadian Parliamentary Helsinki Group

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe: U.S. Helsinki Commission  
The Security Dimension

Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)  
Helsinki Final Act, 1975

Encyclopaedia Britannica  
Détente: United States – Soviet History

Encyclopaedia Britannica  
Helsinki Accords

Encyclopaedia Britannica  
Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT)

History  
Helsinki Final Act signed

Office of the Historian  
Milestones : 1969-1975, Helsinki Final Act 1975

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly (OSCEPA)  
History