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Mitterrand, the End of the Cold War, and German Unification

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George Ross

Frédéric Bozo's book on French foreign policy around German unification in 1990 is a superb work of contemporary diplomatic history. Already widely reviewed, it has assumed its rightful place as a must-read to understand the period and the earth-shaking international transformation that followed it.⁽¹⁾ Berghahn books is to be congratulated for publishing the volume (which first appeared in French in 2005 by Odile Jacob Editions).

Because German unification was a tipping point leading to the end of the Cold War, the democratization of Central and Eastern Europe, the collapse of 'already existing socialism' and eventually the end of the Soviet Union, it has produced considerable scholarship. Documentary evidence has been in short supply, however. Much, if not most, of what will allow us to know the story in its full complexity has not yet been released. We do have memoirs and accounts by various actors and a lot of broader essays, whose stories mainly focus on the roles of US power and diplomacy, the tragedy of Mikhail Gorbachev and the wily maneuvering of Helmut Kohl, then the German Federal Republic's (FRG) Chancellor, and his Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher.

A stylized digest of these stories would focus first on the reform and changing foreign policy of the USSR leading to the opening of the central European socialist bloc and undermining the viability of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Next, smelling unification, Kohl, a tough and shrewd politician, moved rapidly

to prepare for it, then practically buying it and tipping Gorbachev to cover the moving expenses of Soviet troops to return home. As unification became ever more certain, the large Cold War powers took centre stage to help Kohl's ploys succeed. The most important of these were the Americans, George H. W. Bush and James Baker, and Gorbachev. Kohl came out of the unification period winning an election in 1990 that he might otherwise have lost and pointing an expanded FRG towards the return of its full sovereignty. The end of the Cold War then came without major conflict while poor Mr. Gorbachev lost the Soviet Union. Smaller actors, like the British prime minister Margaret Thatcher was dead set against unification, and French president François Mitterrand, who attempted to slow down the process, really did not count for much.

Bozo's main purpose is to tell the French side of things as fully as he can in order to evaluate basic caricatures of French roles in these stylized stories. The first is that Mitterrand was opposed to German unification. The second is that the French didn't make much difference, at best they followed the Americans and Kohl who did the really hard work. The third is that Mitterrand and the French sought to slow down events as much as they could, sometimes getting in the way of the clear-sighted Americans and the energetic Kohl. Bozo's incident-by-important-incident narrative is meant to show that all three of these views are inaccurate. In doing so he has had the help of many others, mainly in French politics, as well as privileged access to archives public and private, and interviews with many of the insider-artisans of the policies that he so thoroughly tracks.

Practically every shred of evidence that Bozo provides demonstrates that the first caricature is an absurdity. François Mitterrand, his Elysée staff, and the Quai d'Orsay diplomats were not opposed to German unification (in contrast with Margaret Thatcher, who almost certainly was). The second caricature, that Mitterrand and France were simple followers of the Americans, Gorbachev, and Kohl, is no more true. In fact, as Bozo shows definitively, the French played very important roles in the complicated diplomacy around unification. It is the third contention about Mitterrand slowing down German unification that is most serious, however. This is because Mitterrand did indeed hope to slow things down, as the book's ample documentation demonstrates. But these hopes did not lead to much. What the evidence mainly shows, however, is that Mitterrand and France had their own strong objectives which they did their best to achieve. In the last analysis, however, the speed of the process was driven mainly by the rapid collapse of the GDR and the efforts of Kohl to use this to promote unification. Slowing things down after a certain point was futile, therefore. But the French had significant other goals in the crisis, particularly concerning European integration, which they were able to achieve.

The book's preface and early chapters set out Mitterrand's general objectives, many of them familiar longer-term dimensions of French foreign policy. Gaullist and, more broadly, Gallic unhappiness with the Yalta settlement and its bipolar Cold War definitions was a constant. This should not be taken to mean, as many Americans have long done, that France was a disloyal member of the Western camp. If not obediently Atlanticist like the British, France was 'differently' Western. France had long striven for a 'French-led' Europe endowed with policies and capacities, including in the realm of security, that would be relatively independent of American hegemony. The chosen vehicle for this was the integration of Western Europe into the European Community (EC) with the French-German partnership at its heart. In pursuing this strategy of integration the French had tried to exploit, when possible, German post-war 'semi-sovereignty'. One dimension of this was assiduous French effort, institutionalized in the EC's early days by the 1963 Elysée Treaty, to promote ever-deeper German commitment to European integration, which the French saw as the solution of Europe's 'German problem'.

Mitterrand's specific objectives in 1989-90 were derived from these larger goals, and they pointed initially to a gradualist French approach to German unification, as Bozo's first chapters show. Mitterrand was not alone in his deep concerns about destabilizing Gorbachev and possibly unleashing dangerous Soviet nationalists, the Soviet military and hard-line CPUSSR apparatchiks. But his worries about the effects of rapid German unification on European integration were of a different order. Bozo restricts his discussion to the German unification period, but the background to this is important. Mitterrand, a 'European' from the days of the Fourth Republic, had directly tied France's dramatic economic policy U-turn in 1982-3 to strong efforts to renew European integration which, until that point, was mired in 'Eurosclerosis'. The 1984

Fontainebleau European Council and then the Delors? Commission?s 1985 European single market program generated new energies and a cascade of EC changes toward much greater integration. When the German unification crisis began in 1989, France and the European Commission were engaged in the delicate last stages of trying to persuade a reluctant FRG to open final negotiations about European Monetary Union (EMU). It was reasonable, therefore, for Mitterrand to be apprehensive that a rapid push to unification might divert the FRG from EMU and perhaps even pull it away from other European commitments. To American high officials, relatively disinterested in such European domestic matters when they were not opposed to them, these concerns could look like distractions from the immediate and urgent tasks at hand.

In his early chapters Bozo underlines Mitterrand?s hesitations and concludes that while real, they did not slow unification down. The French president?s caution was most evident in autumn of 1989 and early 1990 before the German unification train turned into a TGV. At that point, when the GDR tottered on the edge of collapse, central and eastern Europe moved toward unpredictable changes, and Gorbachev?s freedom of manoeuvre narrowed, there were good reasons to worry about the kind of Europe and Germany that might emerge from the crisis. When Mitterrand pressured Kohl to recognize the Oder-Neisse border in the hope of easing eastern European anxieties about German intentions, Kohl was reluctant to do so, in part for domestic political reasons, feeding Mitterrand?s worries. Massive transition in eastern Europe might also disrupt the EC?s rapid forward movement that was well under way. During this period Mitterrand also reflected on the idea, building on the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), of a European ?confederation? in which the EU-12 would pursue their ?deepening? without rapid ?widening? to the east. The confederation would be a new European architecture of concentric circles in which the central and eastern European countries would be put in a political halfway house to prepare themselves for eventual EC membership.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 began processes that made such careful and cautious forward movement more difficult. Kohl?s 10-point plan of November 28, which took the French and others by surprise, announced an FRG run for rapid unification that then obliged a game change for everyone. The US quickly recognized this, seizing the diplomatic lead to organize the best possible international outcome for the west. Mitterrand continued to urge caution, however, as his trips to Kiev to meet Gorbachev and, more controversially to East Berlin, demonstrated. But the collapse of the GDR in January 1989 meant that there was little practical space anymore for such ?gradualism?. The French president then fell into international line, where he stayed through through the complicated 2+4 dealings which eventually unified Germany and facilitated the peaceful restructuring of central and eastern Europe, albeit after decisive German elections and massive transfers of German money to the ex-GDR and the Soviets.

As 1990 wore on, French attentions turned toward European integration and Germany?s place in it. And here French strategies led to positive results. Bozo is emphatic that there was no direct quid pro quo between France and Germany about EMU, no deal in which the Germans bargained acceptance of EC inter-governmental conferences (IGCs) on EMU to obtain open French support of unification. The IGCs went on nonetheless, leading to the monumental Maastricht Treaty in December, 1991. The Germans themselves first agreed to move forward on EMU at Strasbourg in December, 1989, indicating that Kohl would keep Germany at the centre of what soon would be EU Europe while also continuing the drive to unification. The French had since recognized that EMU would have to be built around Germany monetary policy strictures and structures, even if they tried and failed to get more. Kohl did insist on a second ?political union? IGC aimed at improving the EC?s democratic performance, in particular by giving greater power to the European Parliament. Mitterrand, largely through Elisabeth Guigou, his able lieutenant on EC matters, was able to talk the Germans away from their initial strong federalist proposals towards French intergovernmental preferences on matters of EU institutions. The Maastricht Treaty also would contain vague but significant language about the creation of an EU common foreign and security policy which recognized French concerns about post-Cold War security.

Bozo?s goal is to provide a very careful narrative to expose, in detail, French strategies in the events leading to German unification. The goal is deliberately modest, even if the book envelops readers in a wealth of complexity. Bozo wants to set the record straight about what the French did, why they did it, and, for better

or worse, what the results were. His central purpose is reconsidering what he believes to be unfair and inaccurate evaluations of French actions, and he knew that to do this successfully he needed to steer clear of critical engagement with the strategies of countries other than France.

Underlying this is a conceptualization of the fateful period of German reunification as a complex game whose many players had different interests, objectives, and resources, with the French only one player among many. Moreover, whatever France's objectives, it was not always fully endowed with the resources needed to win them all. Despite this, Bozo argues, they were able to attain some of their more important goals. The big 'winners' were clearly Kohl and the Germans., who had the most to gain, the all-important resource of proximity which allowed them to take risky initiatives, and the advantage of overwhelming support from allies (including France) who themselves had much to gain if unification could be made to happen safely. The Americans were the other big winners because their Cold War centrality, their sheer power, and their importance to Gorbachev's reformist goals for the USSR allowed them to broker a diplomatic solution that worked for everyone, themselves in the first instance. The initial cautious and gradualist French responses to German unification thus lost out in the face of German and American actions. These initial responses, which others shared, cost little, if anything, in the ultimate outcome, however, mainly because behind his Florentine mysteriousness, François Mitterrand was a genuine realist who knew when to stop insisting. The French also lost out in their Gaullist quest for a pan-European, as opposed to an Atlantic, post-Cold War security order, and Mitterrand's 'confederation' idea was a casualty of this. The Americans came out of the unification period very well placed to nail down central and eastern European ties to NATO in ways that made a post-Cold War reconfiguration of NATO feasible, to the chagrin of Mitterrand and the French. But as Bozo frequently underlines, the French had other, perhaps more important, objectives. They were successful in their quest to deepen European integration, in large part by persuading the Germans to continue joint action toward EMU and in the Maastricht Treaty. Gorbachev was the big loser. Getting him to cooperate in unification was absolutely necessary to maintain international stability and he got little in return except honorable retirement as an international political sage.

Bozo's book is a landmark which helps us understand the immensity and intricacy of a major turning point in international relations. Some day we will have all the documents and be better able to put all of the pieces together. In the meantime, Bozo has moved us well beyond initial credit-claiming and blame-avoidance debates. What more could we ask? There may be one thing. Even after reading Bozo, François Mitterrand and the ways in which he worked remain cloudy. Unclouding this remarkable man and his methods is not the task that Bozo chose, of course. He has done extraordinarily well at the task that he did choose, however, and this is enough.

Notes

1. For a good sampling of review responses see the H-Diplo roundtable review, which includes discussion by Marc Trachtenberg, Will Gray, Jacques Lévesque, as well as by two American authors who were also diplomatic actors in the German unification period, Robert Hutchings and Philip Zelikow, 11, 23, 26 April 2010

<<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables> [2]> [accessed 14 December 2010].[Back to \(1\)](#)

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