

France under President Mitterrand and German Unification

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France was one of the four occupation powers in Germany after World War II, still one of the four members in the Allied Control Council in Berlin until 1990, and one of the “two plus four” powers which negotiated the international conditions of German re-unification in the same year. Therefore it is of special interest what the positions of the French government were concerning the reunification of Germany at the end of the 1980s.

A strategic motive underlying the division of Germany was the desire to weaken it such that it might never again make war against its neighbors. Together France, Britain, and the United States merged the zones they occupied, creating the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1949. The remaining territory, falling to Soviet control, became the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Until these territories were reunified, the Cold War dominated their international relations, reflected in their ideological and military orientations, embodied in NATO and the Warsaw Treaty respectively.

Unlike the other members of the 2+4 process, France and the FRG, represented by President Charles de Gaulle and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, concluded a special Friendship Contract, the Élysée Treaty, in 1963. It was a remarkable caesura in the relationship between these former enemies. Both countries became the “motor” of the European unification process. This contract was remarkable not only because of the history of both countries, but because of the personal attitude of Charles de Gaulle. His foreign policy had the aim of leading France back to the circle of the leading nations in the world – in independency. The most important goal for “Gaullism”¹ was very straightforward; it was to ensure the strength, vitality, permanence, and grandeur of the French nation.² Now, after the Élysée Treaty, he thought that this aim could be fulfilled in the framework of Europe together with the FRG.

However, the question is how President Mitterrand thought about this relationship between both nations in the process of unifying Europe, when Germany became united and therefore – perhaps – stronger. Another question was in our thoughts: Which experience would be dominant – Mitterrand’s generational experience as a soldier against Nazi-Germany or the experience with post-war

¹ For Gaullism, see Volkmar Lauber, *The Political Economy of France; From Pompidou to Mitterrand* (NY: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 3.

² Alistair Cole, *Francois Mitterrand: A Study in Political Leadership*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 136.

West Germany after the Élysée Treaty as a member of NATO? Was he even against German unification like Margaret Thatcher?

German and European unification – what should be on the first rank?

The foreign policy that Mitterrand adopted was in many aspects close to the one which was created by Charles de Gaulle. For both of them, as well as the other presidents after de Gaulle, it was the nation and its place in the world that represented the beginning point of their political thought.³ Like de Gaulle, Mitterrand was also very open and stressed, on several occasions, the imperative of maintaining France's 'rank' as the third military power in the world.⁴ This could be a reason why Mitterrand seemed weary of the speed of German unification, as he might not have wanted to see a unified Germany come at the expense of France's European standing.

Knowing that German reunification was inevitable, Mitterrand nevertheless wanted it to proceed slowly, allowing a strong, stable, internally cohesive Europe to emerge first. An integrated Europe, he believed, would anchor a reunified Germany so that it wouldn't upset the existing balance, lending it greater strength and stability in turn.⁵ An interview done with one of Mitterrand's advisors, Jacques Attali, can attest to this. Attali cites Mitterrand's belief that "the construction of Europe could only be jeopardized by the German dream of unity without an improvement of European unity."⁶ Mitterrand did not want to sacrifice the idea of a united Europe just to have a united Germany. He did not have much choice however as the unification of Germany began to proceed at a very fast speed.

Another major reason as to why Mitterrand wanted German unification to move slowly was because he wanted a stable, stronger Europe before a unified Germany. He knew that a unified Germany was going to happen, but he wanted it to come years into the future after Europe had gained a stronger foothold and relationship with all its countries. Mitterrand was convinced that what they needed was a push on the European integration to provide an anchor for a reunified Germany in order to strengthen the European countries stability. He wanted this instead of a quick push to unify Germany.⁷ An interview done with one of Mitterrand's advisors, Jacques Attali, can attest to this. Attali states that Mitterrand wanted European unity before German unity; that "the construction of Europe could only be jeopardized by the German dream of unity without an

³ Lauber, 4.

⁴ Cole, 142.

⁵ Wayne Northcutt, *Mitterrand: A Political Biography* (NY: Holmes & Meier, 1992), 328.

⁶ Jacques Attali, interview by Hans-Christoph Blumenberg, 1990.

⁷ Northcutt, 328.

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Further demonstrating Mitterrand’s reluctance to concede a reunified Germany ahead of an integrated Europe he stated, at a press conference, that he “would be extremely surprised if a fundamentally new European structure did not materialize within the next ten years.”⁹ Many of the sources at the time seem to suggest that Mitterrand said this because he and France were completely unprepared for and did not want German unification; however, this is simply not true. Mitterrand wanted what he called a “reconciled and independent Europe.”¹⁰ Mitterrand felt that a stronger Europe was the way to go, exerting pressure for a unified Europe prior to German unification. Unfortunately, for Mitterrand, this was not to be.

In November of 1989 the Berlin Wall came down, implying a new freedom for the German people, now able to come and go between the two German states. Contrary to the public view, the opening of the Berlin Wall represented a significant threat in the eyes of the French government, a potential offset to Europe’s stability that demanded unanticipated accommodation to a new power in central Europe.¹¹ After the wall fell, there was some reluctance from Mitterrand to actually acknowledge that the balance of power had changed in Europe.¹² This was at a time when Mitterrand was both President of France and President in Office of the European Community.¹³ Mitterrand questioned whether the Germans really wanted to unite as one single state or if they would prefer “a different solution yet to be determined.”¹⁴ Statements like this might explain why Mitterrand was criticized for not responding quickly enough to the fall of the Berlin Wall and why some believe he didn’t desire unification.¹⁵ The problems with these critiques are that they are partly unfounded. Mitterrand took his time when trying to decide what to do by placing events in perspective, considering potential developments in the long term, holding that the importance of the past ought not to be underestimated.¹⁶ For some observers, this long thought process might appear to be Mitterrand acting slowly or not knowing what to do, but

⁸ Jacques Attali interview.

⁹ Cole, 137.

¹⁰ Northcutt, 296.

¹¹ Renata Fritsch-Bournazel, “German Unification: A Durability Test for the Franco-German Tandem,” *German Studies Review* 14/3 (October 1991): 575.

¹² Cole, 152.

¹³ Fritsch-Bournazel, 578.

¹⁴ Cole, 153.

¹⁵ Northcutt, 318.

¹⁶ Daniel Vernet, “The Dilemma of French Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)* 68/4 (October 1992): 656.

Mitterrand simply did not want to not make the wrong decision. Mitterrand's problem, along with the French people, was to find the right policy that would combine the maximum advantage for France and European unity with the minimum amount of disadvantages.¹⁷ This is why Mitterrand went into the negotiations for German unification wanting the process to go slow and hoping that he could make that happen.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the pace of reunification truly began to pick up. The process now began with all the countries meeting to discuss how they could best unite Germany without too many negative consequences. At the beginning, the people in France, Poland, and the Soviet Union, who had all suffered the brunt of German military fury during the Second World War, were all reluctant to allow a restoration of a unified state of Germany.¹⁸ However, at that point they had no way of turning the clock back and stopping what had started when the wall had fallen. The fall of the Berlin Wall guaranteed that there was no longer anyway to stop the unification process completely without angering all of the German people. There also seemed to be no way of slowing down the process.

Mitterrand made a very impressive attempt in this direction. On a meeting with Gorbachev in Kiev on December 6, 1989, he criticized not only Chancellor Helmut Kohl because of the speed of his policy on unification, but he also made a proposal to Gorbachev; he and Mitterrand should visit the GDR Prime Minister Hans Modrow in East Berlin. Gorbachev refused for internal reasons but Mitterrand made this visit on December 21. Kohl was not amused. It was only one day after the West German Chancellor had held his famous speech in Dresden in front of the destroyed "Frauenkirche." This took place in an East German City in front of thousands of GDR citizens and hundreds of cameras of nearly every important TV-stations of the world – even from China.¹⁹

Two plus four negotiations and NATO

At the end of January 1990 during talks between West German and US diplomats, the idea came up that the four "victors" and the two Germanys should negotiate about the international conditions of Germany's unity. In an attempt to ensure that everyone's concerns were heard, especially those of the countries that were worried about the unification, a group meeting was planned to talk through the whole process. These talks became known as the "2+4" talks. During the same time in Moscow, Cernaev spoke in a counselor's meeting of "4+2" negotiation,

¹⁷ Ronald Tiersky, "Mitterrand's Legacies," *Foreign Affairs* 74/1 (1995): 116.

¹⁸ Konrad H. Jarausch, *The Rush to German Unity* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁹ Alexander von Plato, *Die Vereinigung Deutschlands – ein weltpolitisches Machtspiel* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2003), 136.

stressing the importance of the victims.²⁰ On this meeting Gorbachev accepted the possibility of German unification for the first time.

The French Government really had no choice but to agree to be a part of the four power framework that would manage the merger of the two Germanys if they wished to have a say in how the unification was carried out.²¹ Mitterrand must have known that the quality of France's relationship with Germany would define France's success in the whole European Union.²² In addition, Mitterrand would have wanted to give the outwards appearance that he truly was one hundred percent supportive of this quick paced reunification process while possibly working from within the four powers to slow the process down. From the beginning though the process was off to a rocky start as the United States wanted a unified Germany in NATO (North American Treaty Organization) while France did not want this at all. NATO had been formed in April of 1949 to prevent the absorption of Western Europe into the Soviet Empire.²³ Mitterrand was probably against the unified Germany joining NATO, because NATO had been formed by the United States and its European Allies at the time.²⁴ Mitterrand must have been worried that if a unified Germany joined NATO then that would mean that the United States would have more control over Germany and even Europe. This was something that Mitterrand did not want. He sometimes tried to install a new European security system which should replace NATO and the Warsaw Treaty: first in Kyiv during the meeting with Gorbachev on December 6 1989 – where Gorbachev did not even recognize this offer when it came, the second time in a meeting with the Soviet President in Moscow in May 25, 1990.²⁵ This time Gorbachev had this idea for himself. But Mitterrand knew, the more the time was running, the less there was a possibility for a new European Security System. The Warsaw Treaty was nearly no longer existent and not a trump card in the game.

Mitterrand knew that a united Germany needed to be a part of some alliance. Mitterrand just did not agree with George Bush, the President of the United States, that NATO was the only alternative.²⁶ Bush and the Americans had wanted a unified Germany in NATO²⁷ hoping to reduce the Soviet influence in Europe. Mitterrand's reasons for not wanting NATO to have control of a unified Germany lay in France's history with NATO. In the 1960s while Charles de

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

²¹ Jaraus, 113.

²² Tiersky, 117.

²³ Alvin J Cottrell and James E. Dougherty, *The Politics of the Atlantic Alliance* (NY: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1964), 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Von Plato, 139, 340.

²⁶ Northcutt, 330.

²⁷ Robert B. McCalla, "NATO's Persistence after the Cold War," *International Organization* 50/3 (1996): 449.

Gaulle had been President of France, Mitterrand, one of the men under de Gaulle, had supported de Gaulle in the decision to withdraw France from NATO.²⁸ Mitterrand in his presidency did not want to re-enter NATO.²⁹ This politics did distress other countries, namely the USA, Germany, and Britain, but there was nothing that could be done about it.³⁰ Mitterrand even tried to promote another organization. There was the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The CSCE was an organization with thirty-five nations that had been established in 1975.³¹ After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Mitterrand tried to encourage the development of this organization.³² Mitterrand's government even went as far as to develop a strategy for a new security architecture in Europe including the North Americas and the Soviet Union,³³ and replacing the United States power with something that was more cohesive to the European Union.³⁴ This did not work as Mitterrand was unable to convince its partners to join a new alliance and push aside the United States.³⁵ Mitterrand was left without any other choice but to give up his plans for an alternative to NATO. In the end, France finally decided not to hinder German unification under NATO any further.³⁶ This did not however stop Mitterrand from attempting to slow down the process of unification because he still wanted this process to be integrated in the whole process of the European unity.³⁷

According to one French ambassador the fear for France was that a unified Germany would dominate Europe and no one in the East or West wanted that.³⁸ This is probably besides the European question the main reason Mitterrand attempted and tried so hard to slow things down. Mitterrand pleaded with George Bush, the President of the United States for them to move slowly, but Bush did not seem to respond to this.³⁹ Mitterrand decided to take matters into his own hands. On December 6th, 1989 Mitterrand attempted to renew the Franco-Russian axis to try and frustrate the attempts for German unity.⁴⁰ Mitterrand no doubt had hoped that Mikhail Gorbachev as well as the other ministers in the Soviet Union

²⁸ Cole, 137.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Northcutt, 290.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Von Plato, 423.

³⁴ Kori Schake, "NATO after the Cold War, 1991-1995: Institutional Competition and the Collapse of the French Alternative," *Contemporary European History* 7/3 (1998): 379.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 407.

³⁶ Jarausch, 30. See also Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 263.

³⁷ The end of this story: In June 2009 France became a full member of NATO again.

³⁸ Cole, 152.

³⁹ Maier, 254.

⁴⁰ Cole, 154.

would side with him or try to foreclose German unification or slow its process down. This however was flawed thinking as the USSR would always put its relations with Germany above those of France.⁴¹ Mitterrand's plan seemed to have fallen through and he had no choice but to continue to go through with the unification process. The President of France would have a tiny bit of revenge on Gorbachev a year later.

The Baltics

In the early 1990 the Baltic States were pulling away from the USSR. Mitterrand, when talking about the situation of Lithuania gaining its independence, stated "I'd like to remind you that France has never recognized Soviet sovereignty in Lithuania."⁴² Mitterrand also stated that France's foreign policy was absolutely clear and straightforward with regards to the issues of Lithuania's independence in that France agreed they should have it.⁴³ This could have been some little piece of revenge on Mitterrand's part in agreeing with Lithuania in their bid for independence. In some way it could have been Mitterrand's slight way of getting back at Gorbachev for the leader of the Soviet Union not supporting him in attempting to slow down the process of German unification. In the end though, it helped Lithuania as they gained their independence from the Soviet Union and Mitterrand was seen as having been a part of helping the country achieve that.

Mitterrand and Thatcher

At the end of 1989 Mitterrand began to align himself in some parts with Margret Thatcher, the Prime Minister of Great Britain. Thatcher was completely against the unification of Germany.⁴⁴ While Mitterrand was not completely against German unification and while he never completely trusted Thatcher, he still needed someone on his side during the process.⁴⁵ Mitterrand knew that this was problematic because he could not very well tell Thatcher that he did not agree with her, and he could not tell Gorbachev that he did not want German before European unification. It could seem to an outsider that Mitterrand was playing both sides against each other to try and make sure that he got something out of it. Mitterrand's former advisor Jacques Attali contradicts this view. Attali states that Mitterrand's main view was that "it was very dangerous to have a Germany, a

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Tilo Schabert, "France and the Baltic States during the Presidency of Francois Mitterrand," *Baltic Worlds* 2 (2011) and in www.balticworlds.com (August 1, 2011).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Jacques Attali interview.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

nationalist Germany” and that was the reason why Mitterrand was negotiating with both Thatcher and Gorbachev.⁴⁶ Mitterrand also sided with Thatcher in questioning the changes that the Americans wanted to make in the NATO nuclear strategy.⁴⁷ The reason Mitterrand sided with Thatcher on this issue was the language of the changes. The proposed changes were that if the Soviets would eliminate all nuclear artillery shells they had that all of Europe would do the same as well.⁴⁸ Mitterrand and Thatcher did not agree with the language and did not want to completely get rid of all of their nuclear weapons just as a show of good faith for the Soviets doing the same. In the end this issue was dropped by the United States without either side agreeing to disarm their nuclear weapons. The alliance with Mitterrand and Thatcher did not really go anywhere and it did not stop German unification. There is also no evidence that Mitterrand’s actions slowed down the unification process at all. In October of 1990 the two Germanys were united once more. It had happened faster than Mitterrand would have wanted but there was no going back now. The face of Europe had changed and there was no changing it back to the way it had been before.

France intern

Francois Mitterrand did in some ways believe in a unified Germany; he just wanted certain things to come before that happened. There was also pressure from within his own country about the issue. Some of the French politicians had begun to think that the Franco-German relationship had already become one-sided.⁴⁹ Mitterrand had to deal with these concerns and show the politicians of France that the relationship had not become one-sided. More than anything, Mitterrand wanted for both France and Germany to be equal to each other.⁵⁰ To some degree this was the end result of the unification. France and Germany both became equals. France and Germany together had special responsibilities in shaping a new Europe that we know today.⁵¹

In the end, Mitterrand did in some way achieve what he wanted. Europe was stronger with a new unified Germany.⁵² In some ways it was also closer, as

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 320.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁴⁹ Cole, 152.

⁵⁰ Northcutt, 319.

⁵¹ Fritsch-Bournazel, 582.

⁵² Mitterrand demanded the introduction of a common currency – the Euro. Kohl agreed to get the support from Mitterrand for German unification though he saw the Euro as not helpful for the European economy. “Mitterrand forderte Euro als Gegenleistung für die Einheit,” *Der Spiegel* (25 September 2011).

now France and Germany had a closer relationship. Francois Mitterrand did want German unification; he was just not willing to risk a divided Europe to get it. Mitterrand also wished that both sides of Germany take their time in the process of unification and keep it slow. It did not work out that way and the unification happened quicker than anyone expected. The unification did not create a divided Europe though; it created a new Europe that Mitterrand can be proud at having had a hand in making. In one important question, namely, German reunification under the roof of NATO, Mitterrand can be said to have been unsuccessful.