Mitterrand’s France, the End of the Cold War, and German Unification: A Reappraisal

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France’s role is often overlooked in the abundant literature on the end of the Cold War. In addition, most accounts tell of the country’s alleged lack of understanding for the democratic revolutions in the East and of its supposed attempt to block German unification. Yet archival research, now becoming possible, which allows for a thorough reappraisal, categorically invalidates most of this. In spite of concerns over the risk of instability – which were shared by other key players – French diplomacy in fact played an important and constructive role in the events of 1989–91, not least through the relaunch of European integration which led to the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. The French case provides a useful reminder that the dominant narrative of these events – with its almost exclusive focus on the superpowers (the US to begin with) and its lack of interest in European actors or factors – needs to be revised.

While such ‘key’ actors as the United States, the Soviet Union and Germany have received the widest attention in the vast literature covering the end of the Cold War and German unification, France’s share remains, to this day, marginal. Thus, for example, in his recent book on the history of the Cold War, the last chapter of which focuses on its ending, the US historian John Lewis Gaddis makes no mention at all of its role in the critical 1989–91 period – other than to state that the French president, François Mitterrand, then shared with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher an ‘anxiety’ towards the ‘unsettling prospect’ of German unification. In spite of the paucity and the mostly incidental character
of references to France's role – which is almost never treated as such in the literature – there emerges a distinctly negative picture: not only, it is most often argued, have French decision makers – and Mitterrand to begin with – lacked clear-sightedness, but French policies were reactive, not proactive. Worse yet, these policies allegedly consisted in trying to slow down, if not to impede these historic developments, whether German unification (against which Mitterrand, the story goes, tried to gang up with Gorbachev and Thatcher), the break-up of the USSR (whose integrity the French president supposedly wanted to preserve at all costs after having essentially ratified the August 1991 attempted coup against Gorbachev) or the integration into Western institutions of former Soviet satellites (whose accession to the then European Community Mitterrand's European 'confederation' project was, according to critics, chiefly aimed at impeding).2 'More than anyone else', writes the British historian Tony Judt in his otherwise impressive study of Europe from post-Second World War to post-Cold War, 'the French were truly disturbed by the collapse of the stable and familiar arrangements in Germany and in the Communist bloc as a whole' – in other words by the end of the Cold War and German unification.3

The narrative of France's shortcomings or outright failure in face of the revolutionary events of 1989–91 has seemingly become so widespread that the case might appear to be closed. Yet there are many reasons why historians may want to reopen it – or, for that matter, to simply open it. First, this narrative remains, to this day, unconvincing: because the French case per se has not been at the centre of the scholarly literature, there is need for a rigorous historical treatment. With previously unavailable archival material becoming accessible and with the context allowing for a more dispassionate appraisal of France's role in these events, the time may have come for such an effort. Second, this same narrative raises a number of intriguing issues, beginning with the existence of a disconnect between the account of France's failed 'exit' from the Cold War and the country's traditional vision of its role as the foremost advocate of the end of 'Yalta' since General de Gaulle.4 As for France's alleged opposition to German unification, it is not easily reconciled with the centrality of relations with the FRG and of European construction in French policies since 1950.5 If only because of the contrast between France's past Cold War revisionism and the widespread image of its attachment to the status quo in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a serious historical investigation is needed: what were France's policies at the end of the Cold War? Why were they pursued? And what was their balance sheet? Finally, one suspects that researching the French case beyond what the dominant narrative conveys may contribute to a better understanding of the events at large: if one is to move beyond the historical doxa of the end of the Cold War that has imposed itself in the past 15 years, then a fresh look at actors, processes and factors that have been so far much too neglected is surely in order; reopening the French case, in other words, arguably allows for a broader re-examination of the whole story.

While the magnitude of the task at hand and the sheer exposition of its findings go beyond the limitations of a journal article, this particular contribution nevertheless seeks to offer an overview; it will, therefore, (1) try and explain the unfavourable
record of France’s role in these events in the existing literature; (2) argue for a reappraisal of the French case through serious, archival-based historical research; (3) present a selection of the key factual findings obtained through such an investigation which, it turns out, contradict major aspects of the dominant narrative; (4) lay out an interpretative framework in order to explain the policies which France actually pursued at the end of the Cold War and with regard to German unification; and (5) offer a reassessment of these policies and of their significance for the broader picture as well as some concluding thoughts on the future research agenda.6

France in the End of the Cold War Literature

How can one account for the prevalence of a narrative so unfavourable to France in most accounts of the end of the Cold War and German unification? The first explanation derives from the initial observation: it is, to a large extent, a reflection of the current state of the literature – a literature which has to date been primarily focused on the US, the Soviet Union and the FRG (not to forget the GDR), as well as their mutual interactions, and which has mostly originated in the US and, to a lesser extent, Germany. One can observe, in that corpus, the progressive crystallization of the negative image of the French record over the past 15 years: first in the press coverage at the time of the events themselves, which was hardly ever approving of French diplomacy, in particular in the US but also in the FRG (on this more below); then in the first book-length studies of the period, usually the work of journalists echoing and most often amplifying the negative features of the earlier press reports (it is at this stage that the pattern of France’s reluctance to accept the end of the Cold War and its opposition to German unification began to take shape); and, finally, in works enjoying academic status, giving scholarly legitimacy to what had by then become a ‘standard’ account.7 It is not difficult to see why this literature has thus far functioned as a diffracting prism to the detriment of France’s image. Press reports – especially when adroitly influenced by official sources – are by nature prone to political distortion, a phenomenon which has evidently been in play in this period, thus contributing to the formation of a negative image of French policies, in particular in the American press and in the early literature.8 As for the scholarly production, it too hardly escapes a certain political logic, which does not help the French case, since it reflects a reading of the events emphasizing the overwhelming, if not triumphant role of the ‘key’ players – the US first and foremost – at the expense of other players like France.9 In sum, one should not forget that the dominant literature, so far, remains closer to official history than to academic scholarship, a state of affairs which to a large extent helps explain the poor reputation of French policies at the end of the Cold War.10

Yet this deforming prism does not explain everything; a series of specifically French factors must also be taken into account. Of course, as we shall see, France’s policies, like those of other players – whatever the hagiographic tendencies of the literature – were not devoid of their own shortcomings: hence, for example, Mitterrand’s failure to solemnly express his support for German unification in late 1989–early 1990 other
than through a somewhat minimalist nihil obstat, a limitation which Hubert Védrine, one of his closest aides, later acknowledged and which contributed to misrepresentations of French designs (on this more below).11 One should also emphasize the domestic context, which played an important role; Mitterrand’s reactions to the ‘revolutions’ of 1989 indeed quickly became the subject of political controversy as the opposition attempted to regain influence after his 1988 re-election by challenging his clear-sightedness in international affairs (a kind of ‘vision thing’ à la française), a blame that would never dissipate. Later on, the aggravation of Mitterrand’s long-concealed cancer, a series of politico-financial scandals and the polemics which developed over his attitude vis-à-vis Vichy and the resistance contributed to making the end of his term particularly painful, thus fuelling a global disrepute which further tarnished perceptions of his record, including the management of the main international event of his presidency, i.e. the end of the Cold War and German unification.12 Last but not least, the contentious publication by his former aide Jacques Attali of a personal ‘diary’ – in which Mitterrand’s attitude in these events is often depicted as marked by anxiety and hesitation – gave no small credit to what by then was already the dominant perception, thus fostering gravely distorted assessments among authors who used Attali as a key source (it is now established that the book is utterly unreliable as a result of outright errors, omissions and even additions in comparison with original documents, not to mention the fact that most of the book is based on material which Attali falsely attributes to himself.13

Faced with the crystallization of this adverse narrative, Mitterrand and his associates did try to set their own record straight. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Elysée was already concerned with negative press coverage, especially in the FRG (Mitterrand ritually deplored the bias of the German press in conversations with Kohl during the autumn of 1989 and winter of 1989/90).14 As events developed, the French did not spare their efforts to try and correct the picture; hence, in a personal response to a July 1990 op-ed piece in which former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had equated France with the USSR as one of the ‘losers’ of the end of the Cold War – no less – Mitterrand’s spokesman argued that, ever since de Gaulle, France had ‘never behaved as a country which tried to perpetuate the Cold War’.15 Then, soon after the facts, the president himself appeared eager to justify his conduct through the writing of memoirs, for which, starting in 1991, he instructed his aides to gather the appropriate documentation, especially with regard to German unification.16 The burden of the presidency until the end of his term in 1995 and his ailing condition prevented him from completing his project. Still, Mitterrand had enough energy to write a short book which, indeed, focused on German unification (it was published after his death in 1996); yet the book fell short of convincing critics as a result of its often self-serving accents as well as sometimes inaccurate elements.17 The defence of Mitterrand’s record rested, from then on, on his former associates and their own testimonies; among these, the most reliable is undoubtedly the 1996 book by Védrine, long time strategic advisor, spokesman and secretary general of the Elysée, the influence of which on the emerging narrative, however, remained limited as a result
of its vantage point – too close to Mitterrand’s – and its timing – too soon after his
death, at a time when controversies on the man and his achievements were still raging;
it was not enough, at any rate, to offset the lingering, negative ‘Attali’ effect.18 Thus, in
stark contrast with the case of the other prominent actors, the ‘official’ French version
has long remained unconvincing, even counter-effective, therefore leaving the
dominant narrative, however unpalatable for the French, essentially unchallenged.

As for academic approaches with a specific focus on France, not only have they
remained scarce so far, but they have not diffused the controversy, as shown when
surveying the – until recently – only two scholarly books on the subject. The first,
edited by Samy Cohen, a reputable French political scientist, is the result of a seminar
organized at Sciences-Po in 1997 which aimed at confronting academics with key
actors and witnesses; while it makes for a stimulating collection of analyses and
debates, it suffers from the fact that contributions are mostly based on secondary
literature and on disputable evidence – including of course Attali – and from its
stated objective of explaining Mitterrand’s ‘lack of foresight’ and his ‘succession of
errors’19 – all of which the editor and the contributors consider a priori to be
established facts, thus by and large uncritically taking the dominant narrative for
granted. As to the second book, it is almost the opposite in its methods and
conclusions: the work of a no less reputable German academic, Tilo Schabert, who was
granted access to documents by Mitterrand himself when he was in office, it sets out to
invalidate what he terms the ‘legend’ of France’s effort to prevent German unification,
thus attempting to reverse the doxa; yet the book is not devoid of weaknesses: in
addition to a sometimes overly hagiographic treatment, Schabert has been criticized
by French and German historians for having relied on a ‘controlled’ access to primary
sources, therefore exposing himself to the risk of a possible bias, if not manipulation.20
The bottom line, therefore, is that we have so far lacked an uncontroversial, scholarly
account of France’s role at the end of the Cold War and in German unification.21

The Time for a Reappraisal

There is reason to believe that the time is now ripe for a reappraisal, for two sets of
reasons. The first has to do with the context, an essential parameter in the writing of
contemporary history: in many ways, the Cold War and its ending have indeed become
just that, i.e. history. All of the key actors of the period have now left the stage for good,
thus decreasing – although of course not completely eliminating – the political stakes
associated with the telling of the narrative: Thatcher left in 1990, Gorbachev in 1991,
Bush in 1993 (the coming to power of his son George W. in 2001 can hardly be seen in
terms of a political continuity), Mitterrand in 1995 and Kohl in 1998. In the French
case in particular, the factors interfering with the analysis and evaluation of
Mitterrand’s record have also lost much of their salience as a result of the relative
pacification of the controversies which had developed before and after his death, as
shown by the somewhat dispassionate celebrations and publications that took place on
the occasion of its tenth anniversary in January 2006.22 More fundamentally perhaps,
whereas the first decade after the events of 1989–91 – which was aptly named the ‘post-Cold War era’ – had showed a high degree of continuity with the Cold War itself (many of the dominant themes of the 1990s such as the US role in Europe, the enlargement of Western institutions, etc., were indeed the sequel of the events of 1989) the past few years have witnessed a radical paradigm shift as a consequence, in particular, of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001: the latter, in many ways, have put a definitive end to the Cold War – ‘9/11’, as the formula goes, has offset ‘11/9’ (9 November, the day when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989) – thus making historical work arguably far less influenced by current issues. As a result, one may argue that Cold War history, and in particular the history of the end of the Cold War, has entered a new phase, in which the risks of retrospective determinism and that of a political writing of history have become less prevalent, thus allowing for a new, more serene appraisal.

Hence the second set of reasons: the increasing availability of primary sources, thus putting France at least on a par with other countries – and to begin with the US and the FRG – in terms of access to archival evidence. Three collections of archival document indeed make it possible, barely 15 years after the events, to thoroughly research France’s role at the end of the Cold War. The first is the archives of the Mitterrand presidency in the National Archives (*Archives nationales*), which gathers the working files of the Elysée staff between 1981 and 1995 and, therefore, represents a major source in order to reconstruct the French diplomatic decision making process, in which the Elysée was of course central. Although it is not devoid of certain lacunae as a result, in particular, of Mitterrand’s often impressionistic personal style (thus making it sometimes difficult to precisely track down the process) and as a consequence of the limited size of the Elysée’s overworked diplomatic staff (hence the occasionally poor quality of the transcripts of conversations with foreign leaders, which, in some instances, have remained in manuscript form), the material in the Elysée files is of great importance for key, ‘presidential’ subjects like German unification and European integration, strategic issues, as well as bilateral relations at the highest level, for which documents emanating from close Mitterrand associates such as Elisabeth Guigou (European affairs) and Védrine (strategic affairs), often annotated by the president himself, represent a remarkable source. A second important collection of documents is of course to be found in the diplomatic archives (*Archives diplomatiques*) of the Quai d’Orsay (the ministry of foreign affairs), which complement the former and help reconstruct the role of French diplomacy thanks to the files of the ministry’s high level staff. Indeed, while the political directives undoubtedly came from the Elysée in those years as in most periods under the Fifth Republic, the Quai d’Orsay, under Roland Dumas (a close, long time Mitterrand associate) had a significant role in their implementation, most notably in the German unification process and, in particular, the ‘two plus four’ negotiations for which the files of the director of political affairs, Bertrand Dufourcq, are of especial importance; in addition, in a period characterized by extremely rapid international developments, the diplomatic archives provide much needed documentation both on the day to day progress as seen from the Quai as well as on the reactions to these developments.
among French diplomats – which, according to the standard account, were supposedly characterized by disorientation if not dismay. Finally, historians willing to investigate France’s role at the end of the Cold War and in German unification may, in addition, rely on a significant amount of ‘private’ papers emanating from the Mitterrand presidency (mostly photocopies kept by former Elysée staff members) which, although largely redundant with the ‘official’ series, provide a welcome complement to the latter and allow for informal access to the most relevant materials.

Remarkably, therefore, France’s role in those events may well be the most thoroughly documented among the major powers involved. Of course, in order to reconstruct France’s policies in an international perspective, as must be done, this material should be combined, to the extent possible, with sources from other key countries. In addition, the resources of oral history are also very much available, since most key actors, barely 15 years later, are alive and well. This mass of first-hand evidence, of course, must be handled with the utmost care. As a general rule, the craft of international history must indeed be at its best when dealing with the end of the Cold War and German unification: the pace and intricacy of the events under scrutiny (which the notion of an ‘acceleration of history’ – whatever its heuristic value – very much conveyed at the time), the sometimes daunting problems of interpretation which they raise (not least with regard to the German question) as well as the inherently relative historical judgement which they have so far elicited (e.g. the debates on ‘victory’ in the Cold War), all of these features call for extremely careful historical analysis. These precautions, needless to say, are all the more necessary in the French case. The controversies which have so far surrounded France’s record in these events indeed call, first and foremost, for a meticulous reconstruction of the narrative, both in factual and in chronological terms, for these controversies have largely revolved around what exactly was said or done, and when (e.g., did French diplomacy actually attempt to slow down, if not to impede German unification, and at what precise juncture?) Moreover, French policy must be explained and interpreted on the basis of this well established narrative and not, as has sometimes been the case so far, the other way around: too often, the alleged facts and, in, particular, France’s supposed opposition to German unity, have indeed been inferred from a preordained interpretative framework, that of the country’s supposed reluctance to relinquish a Cold War system which was allegedly inherently profitable to France if only because of Germany’s division. Finally, it is only on the basis of such a documented narrative and considered interpretation of French policies that an assessment can properly be drawn: while most accounts dismiss those policies as irrelevant if not outright unhelpful in the events of the end of the Cold War and German unification, a balance sheet must start from what it was France was trying to achieve in that context and compare it to what was indeed accomplished in order to properly measure the country’s actual contribution and its significance in the overall picture.
Setting the Record Straight

It would be illusory to summarize here the main findings deriving from the exploitation of the above evidence, let alone to present even a brief narrative of France's role in the defining events of 1989–91. One may, however, try and offer answers to some of the key questions which have, so far, remained controversial. First, were French diplomats taken aback by the rapid ending of the Cold War and, most of all, the quick unfolding of German unification? Undoubtedly, just like the diplomats of other key nations. To be sure, French foreign policy, ever since the de Gaulle era, had been premised on the inevitable dissolution of the blocs in the long run, and Mitterrand, by the time of his election in 1981, had clearly espoused the General's vision: 'All that will help leaving Yalta is good', he declared on 31 December of that year. Throughout Mitterrand's first term, French diplomacy had, in fact, rather successfully combined the acknowledgment of existing East–West realities with the ambition to overcome the Cold War status quo; thus, starting in 1985, the French president had proved particularly eager to engage Gorbachev and, by the time of his re-election in spring 1988, he was intent on France playing a leading role in the international transformations triggered by the acceleration of change in the East and, in particular, in the Soviet Union: hence his relaunch of France's politique à l'Est in 1988–89 and his desire to raise the country's profile in Eastern Europe and in East–West relations. By 1989, the Mitterrand administration indisputably had as strong a concept of the overcoming of 'Yalta' as any other Western government, a policy mostly inherited from de Gaulle but also influenced by the Ostpolitik of Willy Brandt: it was about the gradual emancipation of East European countries, the progressive emergence of a West European political entity and, down the road, the blurring of the system of blocs and of the East–West divide. At the same time, however, there is little doubt that the European revolutions of the autumn, because of their suddenness and of their magnitude, contradicted the French anticipation – in many ways a reassuring one – of a step by step convergence between Europe's two halves, one which would require years if not decades and not months or weeks, as turned out to be the case. As a result, the fall of the Berlin Wall came as a complete surprise in Paris as in other capitals; and because they challenged France's progressive and controlled scenario for the overcoming of 'Yalta', these same events also created a certain apprehension among French decision makers, now faced, in the words of the head of the Quai d'Orsay's European directorate, Jacques Blot, with a 'prodigious' acceleration and with the 'reawakening of history'. The fall of the Wall was only the beginning: Helmut Kohl's ten-point plan of late November 1989, Gorbachev's 'green light' to German unity in late January 1990, and Kohl's decision to move toward economic and monetary union between the FRG and the GDR in February provided other such 'accelerations' which, at least initially, left French decision makers no less flabbergasted than others.

Hence a second key, indeed the central question: did French diplomacy in effect attempt to slow down, if not to impede these events outright, in particular German unification, as is widely held? By no means. To be sure, in the crucial period
stretching from the autumn of 1989 to the early spring of 1990, Mitterrand and his associates would have clearly preferred a more moderate, less hectic turn of events, in particular with regard to German unification: one must avoid a rush, Roland Dumas told his counterpart Hans-Dietrich Genscher in no uncertain terms two days after Kohl’s announcement of the ten-point plan, a line the French would keep in the following weeks. The French president did not conceal – not least vis-à-vis the Germans themselves – his preference for a unification process which would be controlled and progressive, and his controversial December 1989 trips to Kiev, where he met with Gorbachev, and, most of all, to East Germany, must be interpreted against the backdrop of this preference, which, incidentally, the US president and his associates seemed to share with his French counterpart at that time. In fact, Mitterrand’s failure, in that period, to deliver a solemn, enthusiastic public expression of France’s support for the goal of German unification – such as participating in the opening ceremony of the Brandenburg gate on 22 December, which he failed to do although he was in East Berlin on that day – cannot be interpreted solely as a public relations shortcoming, as his supporters have claimed: rather, Mitterrand’s attitude in that regard stemmed from his reluctance to ratify, let alone to encourage what he did perceive, in these crucial weeks, as Kohl’s excessive hurry.

And yet at no time did France try to impede the process: among the thousands of pages of documents stemming from the hundreds of boxes of archives mentioned above, not a single one can seriously be interpreted as evidence of an attempt to slow down, let alone to obstruct German unification. There was, in particular, no effort to revive a Franco-Soviet alliance de revers against German unification, as is often held: if anything, the Kiev meeting suggests rather the opposite, i.e. Soviet hopes that the French would agree to a policy of putting a lid on German unification – but to no avail. As for the possibility of a new Franco-British entente cordiale against German unification, it only existed in Thatcher’s imagination: ‘I do not say “no” to [German] reunification’, the French president told a nervous British premier in late January 1990, ‘it would be stupid and unrealistic’; such an attitude, he added, would be ‘without any effect’ and could trigger an ‘angry reaction’ on the part of the Germans. Mitterrand, in fact, had spoken the same words to Kohl two weeks earlier as the two had met at the former’s home in southern France in order to diffuse latent misunderstandings between Paris and Bonn: ‘Whether I like it or not, unification is for me a historic reality which it would be unfair and foolish to oppose’, he emphasized – adding that ‘if he were German, he would be in favour of as quick a reunification as possible’. The chancellor was evidently convinced: as they met again at the Elysée in mid-February, with Mitterrand restating once again his fundamental acceptance of German unification, a buoyant Kohl reacted emphatically, declaring that nothing should be done which could harm the ‘treasure’ of the Franco-German friendship. This, in fact, is the crux of the matter: is it conceivable that Mitterrand could have taken the risk of damaging the Franco-German relationship and the European construction perhaps irredeemably, a result
which a French policy of deliberate obstruction of German unity would almost certainly have achieved—surely in vain? Irrespective of the otherwise plentiful evidence that this was definitely not his policy, the very absurdity of such a gambit should by itself suffice to disqualify the prevailing narrative of France’s opposition to German unification.\textsuperscript{45}

So—this is a third key question—what was French policy really about? The answer, contrary to what most interpretations have so far argued, is quite straightforward: it was, in the words of Védrine, about ‘going along with the developments while trying at best to control possibly destabilizing aspects.’\textsuperscript{46} The evidence indeed amply confirms this characterization, most of all with regard to the French stance on German unification. The French president, in July 1989, was in fact among the first to publicly recognize its ‘legitimacy’—showing his readiness to go along with it—while emphasizing, at the same time, that it should be conducted ‘peacefully and democratically’—thus signalling his willingness to keep events under control.\textsuperscript{47} With upcoming free elections in the GDR ensuring that unification would indeed be ‘democratic’—i.e. the result of self-determination—Mitterrand, in February 1990, spelled out to Kohl how in his view to make sure that the process should also be kept ‘peaceful’ (further to the necessary continuation of Germany’s commitment to European integration—France’s foremost concern against the backdrop of the unification process—this entailed settling the issue of a unified Germany’s relations with the military alliances, confirming its status as a non-nuclear weapons state and, of course, its recognition of the Oder–Neisse line): while ‘the national consequences’ of German unification were the business of the German government, the president summarized, ‘the international consequences’ had to be discussed in an international framework, a statement which the chancellor said he could ‘fully’ endorse.\textsuperscript{48} Hence France’s input into the diplomacy of German unification in the next few months, notably against the backdrop of the ‘two plus four’ negotiation, where its role, as the evidence shows, was far more constructive than has so far been argued, in particular on the critical issue of Germany’s recognition of the Oder–Neisse line (in which France’s goal was not, as often asserted, to slow down the process, but rather to bring about a durable settlement), but also on security matters (Mitterrand, we now know, played a significant role in persuading the Soviets to accept a unified Germany’s membership in NATO).\textsuperscript{49} As for France’s policies at the end of the Cold War beyond the settlement of the German question, they also matched Védrine’s characterization of an approach which essentially aimed at combining change with stability, whether with regard to the political and economic transition in Eastern Europe starting in 1989, the unravelling of the Soviet Union starting in 1990 and, more dramatically, the disintegration of Yugoslavia starting in 1991: in all these instances, the evidence points to French efforts at channelling events, not at preserving the status quo—although Mitterrand’s often vocal insistence on stability may, at times, have been perceived as a rejection of change, thus giving credit to the narrative of France’s failure to accept these developments and of its willingness to preserve the established order.\textsuperscript{50}
Explaining France’s Choices at Cold War’s End

After exposing the facts, one must focus on their interpretation: how are France’s choices at the end of the Cold War – and, in particular, the French willingness to impose a strong international framework on the revolutionary events of 1989–91 – to be explained? By three main factors primarily. The first derives from the weight of history: Mitterrand, in the words of Védrine, was prone ‘to think the future in the light of the past’.51 For French decision makers and for the president in particular, the end of the Cold War and the thaw in Eastern Europe were indeed, from the outset, full of promise but also fraught with the danger of a return of the tragedies of the early twentieth century: the calling into question of ‘Soviet hegemony’ in Eastern Europe, Mitterrand confided to Italian prime minister Ciriaco De Mita in June 1988, ‘is a great risk and yet it is in the logic of history’.52 Hence, starting in 1989, the French president’s frequent references to ‘1913’ (the year of the Balkan war that was the prelude to the First World War), which, in his mind, epitomized the risk of fragmentation and nationalism associated with the end of the Cold War freeze, whether with regard to the liberation of Eastern Europe, to German unification, or, last but not least, to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and, of course, of Yugoslavia. To be sure, the French president’s obsession with the past and his concern with the possible return of instability as a result of the end of ‘Yalta’ have been highlighted by critics as a reflection of Mitterrand’s supposed ‘errors of perception’ and of his inability to cope with change in Europe.53 Yet in spite of his admittedly overblown historical consciousness – he was hardly alone: Bush, Gorbachev, Kohl and certainly Thatcher were haunted by history as well – Mitterrand’s rationale was not to refuse change, but rather to shape a future which would turn its back on ‘1913’: hence the need to give a liberated, post-communist Eastern Europe a stabilizing framework (the European ‘confederation’ project), to prevent German unity from being delivered ‘with forceps’ (in other words in a non-negotiated, unilateral manner) and, last but not least, to contain the disorderly consequences of the otherwise inexorable disintegration of the communist empires. Although they did foster misperceptions, one should not misinterpret Mitterrand’s sometimes excessively vocal worries, which had more to do with personal style than with substance: the ‘profound thinking of a statesman’ – as Védrine underlined while recognizing the existence of such expressions of anxiety – is ultimately expressed through ‘his acts’.54

Beyond the importance of the past, the second factor explaining France’s diplomacy at the end of the Cold War and in the face of German unification had to do with the need to take into account the present realities and, in particular, those in the Soviet Union. Mitterrand’s foremost concern throughout the period was indeed to prevent events from backfiring in Moscow: sheltering perestroika and the Gorbachev ‘experiment’ – which the French president, starting in 1985, clearly identified as the single most important dynamic behind the changes occurring in Europe – from the negative consequences of an overly precipitous transformation was, throughout, a guiding principle of French diplomacy. This was most of all the case with regard
to German unification, which Mitterrand saw to a large extent through the prism of the Soviet capacity to accept it: ‘the immediate future of the Gorbachev experiment cannot be easily reconciled with a swift evolution of the German problem’, he told Kohl on 4 January 1990, adding that ‘German unity should not be achieved in a way which would lead the Russians to become stiff or to indulge in sabre rattling’ and perhaps provoke a military coup in Moscow – ‘we are almost there’, he warned sternly, referring to the worries expressed by Gorbachev at their Kiev meeting one month earlier, while conceding that ‘if it were not for the USSR, it [German unification] would be easy’.

The French president’s preoccupation with the interplay between the Soviet situation and the German question thus had a major role in his attitude with regard to the latter: hence his reservations as to the pace of unification until Gorbachev gave his ‘green light’ to GDR leader Hans Modrow in late January 1990, his insistence on the role of the ‘two plus four’ which he saw primarily as an instrument to manage Soviet concerns, and his concept of the post-Cold War European architecture which, he believed, had to avoid antagonizing Moscow. To be sure, in that critical period, Mitterrand’s key Western partners, Bush and Kohl, while sharing his concern for the success of Gorbachev and the continuation of perestroika, developed a more accurate understanding of the Soviet leader’s readiness to eventually accept German unification in exchange for concessions on their part, whether, respectively, in strategic terms (the transformation of NATO into a less ‘threatening’ entity, which the Bush administration skilfully orchestrated at the July 1990 London summit) or in financial terms (‘I will help [Gorbachev] as much as possible’, Kohl had told Mitterrand on 4 January 1990, anticipating the massive financial package which he would offer Moscow six months later).

And yet, as it turned out, the French president’s obsession with the fate of Gorbachev and perestroika was, in many ways, vindicated by events: the attempted coup in August 1991, which catalyzed the collapse of the Soviet Union in a matter of months, was after all, to a large extent, the consequence of the revolutionary events of the previous two years.

Although the legacies of the past and the realities of the present did matter, the key factor behind French policies at the end of the Cold War had even more to do with the stakes of the future: as was the case for other major players, Mitterrand’s diplomacy was, unsurprisingly, mostly determined by his vision of the post-Cold War international system and of his country’s interests and role therein – a vision largely inherited, it should again be emphasized, from that of de Gaulle. Central to that vision, of course, was Mitterrand’s European grand design: by the time of the revolutions of autumn 1989 – which took place in the wake of a vigorous relaunch of European integration through the 1986 European Single Act and the decision to move towards European Monetary Union (EMU) – the economic and political strengthening of the European community had become a primary objective of French foreign policy against the backdrop of an increasingly close Franco-German relationship, and this endeavour naturally became the touchstone of French policies in the following months and years and, in particular, throughout the process of German unification. Hence the brief trial of strength which took place between Paris and Bonn over EMU – by now
France's absolute priority – in the last few weeks of 1989: Mitterrand’s worries about Kohl's commitment to the project – which had loomed for a few months before the fall of the Wall – were indeed reinforced thereafter as a result of the chancellor’s negative response to the president’s request that the Twelve make a firm decision on the convening of an intergovernmental conference (IGC) at the Strasbourg European Council meeting in December, thus leading Mitterrand to ask whether German unification was acting as a ‘brake’ on European integration. Mitterrand’s staunch insistence combined with Kohl’s realization of what was fundamentally at stake led to the success of the summit, which ratified the Twelve’s firm decision to convene the IGC by the end of 1990, thus putting the EMU effectively on track and vindicating Mitterrand’s strategy of embedding German unification in the framework of European integration – a strategy, it should be emphasized, essentially shared by Kohl: ‘there is a future for Germany only under a European roof’, the latter had told Bush a few days before Strasbourg, thus signalling his understanding of the fundamental interplay between the German question and European integration. Hence, also, and perhaps more importantly, the successful Franco-German relaunch of the EC which took place in the spring of 1990, thus leading in less than two years to the creation of the European Union, which marked a quantum leap in the history of European integration: far from being a ‘hasty’ reaction to ‘French dismay and frustration’ over German unification, as argued by Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice – who completely overlook the vital European dimension of German unification in their otherwise overwhelmingly NATO-focused narrative – the European relance, which was adopted by the Twelve at the Dublin summit in April 1990, was a reflection of the strength of the bilateral relationship and of its centrality to the European project, thus allowing Paris and Bonn to overcome the mutual misperceptions of the previous weeks on some of the aspects of the unification process, most of all the border issue: as Kohl’s former aid Joachim Bitterlich later remarked, ‘it took three or, at most four months’ for the Franco-German tandem to adapt to the new situation and ‘to face up to its joint responsibility with regard to European unification’.

The Maastricht Treaty of February 1992 was thus in many ways the endpoint of the French narrative – and, in fact, of the Franco-German narrative – of the end of the Cold War and German unification as well as the central premise of France’s post-Cold War policies: not only was its conclusion ‘one of the most important events of the past half century’, Mitterrand commented emphatically after a final agreement on the text had been reached in December 1991, but it ‘prepares the next century’. Beyond German unification, the strengthening of the EC/EU was indeed – in conformity with four decades of French diplomacy – the alpha and the omega of France’s architectural blueprint for the new Europe, thus accounting for the main features of its approach of the post-Cold War security system in the early 1990s. On the West European level, this was illustrated by Mitterrand’s determination to see the new-born Union be given (if only embryonic) responsibilities and capabilities in the field of diplomacy and, in the longer run, defence – a ploy in line with the traditional Gaullist view of a unified Europe's key role in preserving the old continent’s stability after the Cold War and
vindicated to some extent by the establishment of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) through the Maastricht treaty.63 On the trans-Atlantic level, Mitterrand’s European priorities and his ambition to see the EU assert itself as a strategic actor in its own right inevitably weighed on relations with the US and the Alliance as a whole, especially at a time when Washington was determined to preserve NATO and the US engagement in Europe: hence, in spite of the search for a compromise with Washington – which led to a little known episode of French–American rapprochement in the second half of 1990 over plans for an overhaul of NATO – the quick return to a familiar pattern of misunderstanding and tension between the two countries throughout 1991 against the backdrop of the competing dynamics of European unification and Alliance adaptation.64 Finally, on the pan-European level, the centrality of European integration in the French vision of the post-Yalta international system explains the launching of Mitterrand’s European ‘confederation’ on 31 December 1989, a project which was meant to offer East European countries a web of exchanges and cooperation with Western Europe: by making the EC and, after its relaunch, the EU the cornerstone of European stability and prosperity after the thaw in the East while at the same time shielding European integration from the risk of dilution as a result of an overly precipitous enlargement, the confederation, in Mitterrand’s words, aimed at ‘warding off the dislocation of the continent’.65 To be sure, with the new Eastern democracies increasingly impatient to join Western institutions and reluctant to participate in an organization that included Russia but not the United States, and with the latter now overtly hostile to the project, Mitterrand’s initiative essentially faded away after the failure of the conference in Prague in June 1991 which was supposed to launch the confederation; be that as it may, the project, for all its shortcomings, did illustrate the priority given to the European construction in Mitterrand’s vision.

Reassessing the End of the Cold War

The balance sheet of France’s policies at Cold War’s end needs to be revised. To be sure, French diplomacy had nurtured a different scenario for the ending of the Cold War and, as a result, was taken by surprise by the revolutionary events of 1989 and their sequel; yet at no point did Paris try to slow down, let alone to impede these developments and, after a brief period of uncertainty, French diplomacy was back on track and, thanks in particular to the importance of Franco-German ties and of Kohl’s and Mitterrand’s personal relationship, it contributed constructively to the international settlement of the German question in particular and of the end of East–West conflict in general while promoting a distinctive vision of the post-Yalta European order with, at its centre, the European construction; and while the European architecture that was beginning to emerge by the end of 1991 did not entirely match that vision – as shown by the reaffirmation of US Atlantic dominance and by the failure of Mitterrand’s confederation project – the success of Maastricht did mark the fulfilment of France’s key European objective at Cold War’s end.
Beyond a reassessment of France’s own balance sheet, one should also emphasize what a reappraisal of French policy arguably brings to the understanding of the events at large, in terms of factors, processes and actors. With regard to the causes that made possible the peaceful ending of the Cold War, an examination of the French role helps give centrality to two key, interrelated factors: one is perestroika, the ‘new thinking’, and Gorbachev himself, which Mitterrand, as emphasized, considered early on to be the major precondition for East–West progress and, later on, the major cause of the revolutions of 1989, and whose fate remained until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 a key preoccupation of French diplomacy;66 the other is the role of negotiation – as opposed to confrontation – in bringing about the end of the East–West conflict, which was another dominant theme in Mitterrand’s approach to these events, thus making for a reading of the end of the Cold War as a positive, rather than a zero-sum game. Moreover, studying the role of French diplomacy helps bring to the fore two key processes which have arguably been instrumental in the development and outcome of the events of 1989–91. One is the pan-European process, which had historically been an important dimension of France’s vision of how to surmount the East–West conflict and remained a major preoccupation when the end of the Cold War was finally in sight – whether under the guise of the CSCE or of the aborted European confederation – thus giving credit to the reading of these events in terms of the ‘Helsinki effect’.67 The other factor was, of course, the European integration process which, by 1989, had become France’s privileged instrument to overcome ‘Yalta’ and which played a decisive – and so far grossly overlooked – role in channelling the events of 1989–91, not least German unification to which, as seen above, the European construction with Franco-German relations at its core contributed to a considerable extent.68 Finally, the French prism sheds light on here-tofore neglected actors of the end of the Cold War: to begin with, European states – other than Germany – which deserve far more attention; beyond France, whose contribution was decisive as a result of its central role in the European construction and of the Franco-German relationship, other European contributions need to be re-examined, including the UK which – beyond the persistently negative ‘Thatcher effect’ – played a more important part than has so far been recognized.69 In sum, reassessing France’s role in the end of the Cold War leads to reassessing the end of the Cold War as a whole and, as a result, to challenging the dominant narrative and interpretations: moving the vantage point – from that of the superpowers and, most of all, the United States – helps an understanding of why these events cannot be understood according to the simplistic pattern of a Western or a US ‘victory’ in the Cold War, and brings into the picture a host of elements that have been mostly underestimated by the dominant literature so far, thus shedding much needed light on the specifically European causes, aspects and outcomes of the end of the Cold War.70

Finally, this reappraisal of French policies provides an opportunity to reflect more broadly on the future agenda of research on the end of the Cold War. In spite of the already considerable amount of academic work on the topic, the French case shows that no less considerable lacunae remain in our historical knowledge and
understanding of these events. Combined with a critique of the dominant literature as sketched out at the beginning of this article, the present reappraisal of the French case may also serve as a caveat for scholars willing to continue to explore this domain, and who will have to keep in mind three imperatives. First, evidence matters: access to primary sources remains a must for any serious historical research, a basic truth which the flurry of secondary sources can easily obscure but of which the French case serves as a welcome reminder, as shown by the discrepancy between its treatment in the dominant narrative and the result of archival work. In order to reach their objectives, historians will therefore need to show determination in seeking access to the relevant material according to the legal processes of their respective countries. Second, the history of the end of the Cold War needs to become a truly international history, both in its objects and its conduct: whereas the field has so far been dominated by a production focusing on the United States and, to a lesser extent, Germany and the ex-Soviet Union and which has mostly emanated from the former two, the time has come to broaden the investigation by multiplying national efforts in order to reconstruct the complexity and multifaceted character of the events (the international character of this historical endeavour must of course be reflected also in the treatment of national diplomacies themselves, which should be done not only on the basis of their own archival records, but also by bringing in relevant foreign sources). Last but not least, future research in the field should not lose sight of a basic tenet of the craft of history, in particular when it comes to the most contemporary: retrospective determinism and, most of all, politically driven historical analysis must be avoided, a pitfall which the first wave of scholarly research has not sufficiently addressed. The time may have come for genuine historical research in the field.

Notes

[2] These contentions are found e.g. in one of the most authoritative accounts of the diplomacy of the end of the Cold War: see Hutchings, *American Diplomacy*. Hutchings’ almost thoroughly negative appraisal of French policy in that period is well summarized by his contention that France tried – no less – to ‘retard history’s course’: see p. 17. The thesis of France’s opposition to German unification and willingness to coalesce with the UK and the USSR is a leitmotiv in the book: see in particular pp. 90, 93, 96–8, 105–6, 112, and 116; Mitterrand’s alleged accommodation with the 1991 coup attempt is mentioned on p. 330 (on this and Mitterrand’s attitude towards the integrity of the USSR, see also below, note 57), and his eagerness to put off East European countries’ EC membership is mentioned on p. 287. For a selection of other works conveying a critical analysis of French diplomacy at the end of the Cold War, see below, note 7.
[3] Judt, *Postwar*, 639 (the author goes on to assert that ‘the first reaction from Paris was to try and block any move to German unification’, although he concedes that Mitterrand later on ‘adopted a different track’, that of setting the Germans a ‘price’ for their unity, i.e. ‘pursuing the European project under a Franco-German condominium’: see p. 640.
[4] For a general introduction to France’s role and Gaullist policies in the Cold War, see Bozo, “France, ‘Gaullism’, and the Cold War”.
[5] On this, see Bozo, “France, German Unification and European Integration”.
The findings in the present article are drawn in part from Bozo, Mitterrand.

For the early journalistic studies illustrative of the emergence of a negative account of French policy at Cold War's end, see for example Pond, Beyond the Wall; for the academic production that has subsequently, to varying degrees, consecrated the negative reading of France's record, see in particular Zelikow and Rice, Germany Unified; Hutchings, American Diplomacy; and Weidenfeld, Außenpolitik. For a critical discussion of the American dominated narrative of the end of the Cold War, see Cox, "Another Transatlantic Split".

After a critical article appeared in the Washington Post on 22 March 1990, in which France was described by an unnamed US official as 'dragging its feet' with regard to German unification, the French embassy in Washington reported the embarrassment of the White House and the State Department vis-à-vis declarations 'once again' emanating from the US ambassador in Bonn, Vernon Walters (the embassy ventured that entertaining a negative image of France's role, as done by 'certain elements in the administration', aimed, by contrast, at promoting the US stance): Ministère des affaires étrangères (MAE), Archives diplomatiques (AD), Série Affaires stratégiques et désarmement (ASD) 1985–90, Box 16, Telegram, Washington 775, 23 March 1990 (Walters clearly used the same device later on in his memoirs on German unification: see Walters, Die Vereinigung).

Although this has given rise to strikingly little debate, the fact is that most of the 'standard' academic production on the period hardly escapes criticism. For all their scholarship, Zelikow and Rice can hardly claim objectivity: although they had both returned to academia when they wrote their book, these two former senior aides in the George H.W. Bush White House never lost touch with politics, as their subsequent careers make clear, and yet they were allowed to base their research on exclusive access to the archives of their own former administration, arguably a unique case of confusion between scholarship and politics, thus raising methodological, if not ethical questions: to what extent can such writing of contemporary history be distinguished from official history? The same question applies to the standard German account by Weidenfeld, which after all was based on discretionary access to the archives of the Chancellery granted by Helmut Kohl himself (the remark also applies to the publication of documents by Küsters and Hofmann, Deutsche Einheit).

For a general discussion of the literature, especially with regard to German unification, see Spohr, "German Unification".

Védrine, Les Mondes, 455–6. Although clearly favourable to self-determination, Mitterrand’s public discourse, in those months, remained guarded rather than actively supportive: 'I am not afraid of reunification'; he declared in a joint press conference with Kohl on 3 November 1989 (one should note that Bush, at the same time, did not sound more upbeat: 'I won’t … dance on the wall', he famously declared after its opening: see Zelikow and Rice, Germany Unified, 105).

On these aspects, see Lacouture, Mitterrand; and Tiersky, François Mitterrand.

Attali, Verbatim. On the unreliability of Attali’s book, see Favier and Martin-Roland, La Décennie Mitterrand, vol. 3, “Les Défis”, 38, who describe the book as nothing short of an 'imposture'; see also the comments by Pierre Joxe, a former Mitterrand associate and minister, who describes the book as full of 'mistakes' and, in some instances, of 'lies', in Cohen, Mitterrand, 426; and Carle, Les Archives. Attali not only contaminated most of the subsequent scholarly literature, but also, in some instances, memoirs of actors: see the recollection of Kohl himself, whose surprisingly negative evocation of his 'friend' Mitterrand in his recent memoirs (in which he frequently alludes to information on Mitterrand's attitude obtained after the facts and quotes 'diaries' of 'close advisors' of the president) has clearly been influenced by the reading of Attali: see Kohl, Erinnerungen, e.g. 954–5, where a whole paragraph of an alleged declaration by Mitterrand in the Council of Ministers, to be found on p. 322 of Verbatim, is reproduced uncritically; other implicit mentions of Verbatim
and of Attali appear e.g. on pp. 984 and 1042. The 'hardening' of Kohl's testimony on Mitterrand – no doubt in part as a result of the 'Attali' effect – is clear when his memoirs are compared with his previous book of interviews with two German journalists: see Kohl, Ich wollte. (The unreliability of Attali's book is clear to anyone who has been able to compare it with original documents. One typical illustration is his account of Mitterrand's important conversation with Gorbachev in Moscow on 25 May 1990, in which a unified Germany's membership in NATO was discussed. Whereas Verbatim (p. 500) has Mitterrand suggest the possibility of a "French" status in NATO for unified Germany—a suggestion which was seen by some as a proof of Mitterrand's "duplicity" in this matter at a time when the U.S. was trying to obtain Soviet acceptance of a unified Germany's full NATO membership—the original document (handwritten notes by Attali himself, who was the note taker) shows the exact opposite, i.e. that this suggestion was made by Gorbachev; private papers, meeting between Mitterrand and Gorbachev, Moscow, 25 May 1990 (this is further confirmed by Gorbachev's own recollection, Wie es war, 134.) On this whole affair, see also below, note 49.)


[16] Carle, Les Archives, 240; in addition to the gathering of the relevant documents, memos about the key events and meetings of 1989–90 were drafted: see e.g. AN, 5AG4/CDM33, Caroline de Margerie, note pour le président de la République, Votre déplacement à Kiev le 6 décembre 1989, 23 January 1992.


[18] Védrine, Les Mondes; among memoirs of lesser significance, see those of Mitterrand's minister of foreign affairs, Dumas, Le Fil.


[20] Schabert, Wie Weltgeschichte; on the reception of the book, see e.g. Mantzke, "Plaudereien an französischen Kaminen"; and Jacques Bariét's review in Politique étrangère 2 (2004): 441–5 (one should note, however, that the kind of access given to Schabert in the Elysée was not different from that granted to Weidenfeld in the Chancellery: see above, note 9).

[21] The four volume history of the Mitterrand presidency by two former AFP journalists stands out as a work of reference both in terms of sources (in addition to interviews, the authors were granted informal access to archival material emanating from the presidency) and of treatment (although the book could be seen as verging on official history, they come up with a fairly balanced judgement of Mitterrand's record); yet the book remains a piece of journalistic investigation and it cannot be seen as a substitute for academic and, especially, historical work: see Favier and Martin-Roland, La Décennie (the relevant volumes are 3 and 4).

[22] See e.g. Jarreau, "Réformes". Interestingly, Attali seized the opportunity to publish a new book which offers a far more favourable reading of Mitterrand’s record than his previous books, in particular with regard to German unification and the end of the Cold War: Attali, C'était François Mitterrand. (Asked whether this amounted to a 'rehabilitation', Attali unashamedly answered that because 'secondary controversies have become blurred', now is the time 'to set events back in their context while taking into account the work of historians'; see his interview in Le Monde, 6 November 2005.)

[23] The 1979 French law on archives establishes a 30 year accessibility rule for government documents (which is brought up to 60 years for documents relating to national security), but it also allows for derogations to this rule on an individual basis. Although the legislation has given rise to debates and controversies in the past few years – in particular with regard
to the alleged lack of transparency in the granting of derogations – it is a fact that it has allowed many historians to work in satisfactory conditions before the completion of the 30 year period; on these issues, see Braibant, *Les Archives*.

[24] The archives of the Mitterrand presidency are accessible to historians by derogation under the 1979 law, but the authorization process – which involves, as for all presidencies since de Gaulle, the agreement of the former president or his representative in addition to that of the Archives nationales – has given rise to controversy on the conditions under which access has been granted; however, the archivists in charge of the collections emphasize that the system has been made more transparent and effective in the past few years, thus allowing access to an increasing number of historians: see Bos and Vaisse, “Les archives présidentielles”.


[26] The dominant narrative, particularly in the US or in the German literature, usually depicts the personal role of Roland Dumas as well as that of high officials in the foreign ministry as especially negative, in particular with regard to German unification to which the Quai d’Orsay had supposedly been historically hostile and remained so by the late 1980s: ‘the Foreign Ministry in particular’, writes Elizabeth Pond in her otherwise thoroughly negative account of French policy, ‘clung to the old suspicions of Germany’: see Pond, *Beyond the Wall*, 159; Kohl himself asserted that Dumas and the Quai d’Orsay ‘did not consider German unity to be desirable’: see Kohl, *Ich wollte*, 177 (Genscher, however, does not share this view, thus showing the relativity of political memoirs: see Genscher, *Erinnerungen*). Yet the archival records of the Quai d’Orsay (which for this period are also accessible by derogation to the 30 year rule) invalidate these assertions, showing rather a strong commitment to Franco-German relations and European integration and a clear acceptance of German unity.

[27] Although the practice of keeping photocopies of original documents has been customary for decades among officials in major capitals, the Élysée under Mitterrand constitutes a special case as a result of his willingness to systematically gather documents during his term – probably with a view to the writing of his future memoirs – thus leading to the constitution by former staff members of a ‘parallel’ archival collection, which some of them kept after their time at the Élysée: on this see Carle, *Les Archives*; this practice has been condemned by archivists and historians as entailing the risk of encouraging the writing of history on the basis of selected documents (Schabert’s book, which is overwhelmingly based on this ‘parallel’ corpus, was heavily criticized for it: see above, note 20), but this risk becomes minimal when both the official and the unofficial materials are exploited, as by this author. (Since then, the ‘unofficial’ collection has been included in the official archives of the Mitterrand presidency at the Archives nationales; however, because access was given informally to the author prior to that, the corresponding documents are referred to as ‘private papers’ in the following footnotes.)

[28] The edited volume of documents from the Chancellery represents to this day the most accessible foreign source for investigating France’s role, in this instance through Franco-German relations: see Küsters and Hofmann, *Deutsche Einheit*; other useful non-French sources (with varying degrees of accessibility at this time) include the documents gathered by the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow, the records of the Bush administration at the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station (Texas) as well as UK documents emanating from the Thatcher Foundation and especially the Foreign Office (which should shortly publish a volume of documents on German unification).

[29] The author has interviewed about 40 former officials from France, the United States, the FRG and Russia.

[30] To illustrate the point on the interpretative problems involved when historically addressing the German question, it is enough to ask when that question was actually reopened (if it was ever
closed), for this simple query immediately raises many complex issues, not least that of the relationship between official discourse and intimate persuasion; for a remarkable attempt at ‘thinking’ the German question historically, see Garton Ash, *In Europe’s Name*.

[31] Mitterrand’s trip to the GDR in December 1989 – which is often used as evidence of his eagerness to slow down the process – offers an illustration of the importance of the ‘what’ and the ‘when’: what did the French president do or say during his visit, especially with regard to German unification? Did he actually speak or act in favour of the persistence of the GDR as a separate state? As to the ‘when’, what was the exact context of the visit? Was the rapid collapse of the East German regime barely a month later already predictable at the time? How did other key actors treat the issue of contacts with the GDR in that period? (One should remember, for example, that James Baker made a visit to East Berlin only a few days before him.)

[32] This is the underlying line in most of the negative accounts of French policy: “for four decades the division of Europe had been good to France”, writes e.g. Elizabeth Pond in support of her contention that Mitterrand’s France was hostile to German unification: see Pond, *Beyond the Wall*, 158 (the same logic pervades the analysis of Brzezinski, which Védrine tries to challenge: see above, note 15).


[34] See e.g. MAE, AD, Europe, série URSS 1986–90, box 6670, Direction d’Europe, Sous direction d’Europe orientale, note a.s. L’URSS fin mai 1988 et les relations franco-soviétiques, 31 May 1988; and private papers, Hubert Védrine, note pour le président de la République, Le développement de nos rapports avec l’Europe de l’Est, 13 July 1988,. On this period, see Bozo, “Before the Wall”.


[37] Although the dominant US narrative can hardly dissimulate that Washington was equally surprised, one senses the temptation to do just that, sometimes at the expense of credibility: ‘while surprised by the speed of events, we had nonetheless seen unification coming sooner than others, including the Germans themselves’, writes Hutchings somewhat daringly, *American Diplomacy*, 97 (President Bush’s personal account, it should be noted, comes out as much more modest: see Bush and Scowcroft, *A World*).


[39] Hence Baker wrote to Bush on 20 December 1989, that Kohl may be going ‘too far, too fast’ on German unification: see Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified*, 148; Kohl himself had confided to Mitterrand a few days earlier that he was doing everything possible to ‘avoid a rush’ and that he was trying to ‘reduce the speed’: see private papers, account of the meeting between Kohl, Mitterrand and Jean-Pascal Delamuraz (president of the Swiss Confederation) in Switzerland, 15 December 1989.

[40] ‘I did not send a representative to the lecture [which Kohl held in Paris on German unification]’, he told Thatcher on 20 January 1990, ‘for I could not allow his words to bind me’: see private papers, account of the meeting between Thatcher and Mitterrand at the Élysée, 20 January 1990.

[41] Although French archival sources on the meeting are somewhat scarce, the evidence is sufficient to rule out the standard narrative of Mitterrand’s attempt to enrol Gorbachev in a policy of blocking or even slowing down German unification; for a detailed discussion, see Bozo, *Mitterrand*, 156–60 and 416–18. (The parallel meeting between Dumas and Soviet foreign
minister Edward Chevardnadze at Kiev, of which we do have detailed minutes, clearly confirms this: while the latter urged the French ‘to have the courage to say what [they] think’ and to take ‘a clear stand’, the former flatly objected that ‘the German people have a right to self determination’: see AD, Europe, URSS 1986–90, box 6674, Ambassade France en URSS, compte-rendu de l’entretien entre M. le ministre d’Etat et M. Chevardnadze à Kiev le 6 décembre 1989, 15 December 1989.)

[42] Private papers, account of the meeting between Thatcher and Mitterrand at the Elysée, 20 January 1990. Thatcher’s recollection of her conversations with Mitterrand in that period – in which she claims that he shared her reservations vis-à-vis German unification – is often used in order to substantiate the ‘standard’ narrative: see Thatcher, The Downing Street Years, 790 ff., in particular 797–8. Yet this piece of evidence is weak. Although Mitterrand did often appear reluctant to contradict her head-on during their bilateral meetings – which could explain Thatcher’s ex post tendency to enrol Mitterrand in her own germanophobia – the evidence confirms his clear rejection of her anti-German (and of course anti-European) policies. Thatcher’s foreign minister, Douglas Hurd, understood that Mitterrand’s apparent concurrence with Thatcher was ‘just intellectual play’ and that his actual policy was by no means to prevent German unification, a message he tried to convey to Thatcher: Hurd, Memoirs, 383 (one must also take account of the fact, reported by Kohl, that Thatcher, in her conversations with foreign leaders, ‘seemed always to hear what she wanted to hear’; see Erinnerungen, 958).

[43] Gespräch des Bundeskanzlers Kohl mit Staatspräsident Mitterrand, Latché, 4. Januar 1990, in Küsters and Hofmann, Deutsche Einheit, 682–90; see also the French account, private papers (German and French minutes are generally concurrent, although the German ones are usually more detailed).


[45] On this, see Bozo, “France, German Unification, and the European Integration”; the importance of European integration and of Franco-German relations is in fact vastly underestimated in the so far dominant US narrative of the events of 1989–90, which certainly helps explain to a large extent the myth of French opposition to German unity which it conveys (on this more below). A related, often overlooked, yet essential aspect of the issue is the fact that – in contrast with some sectors of the media or the political class, which showed some nervousness – the French people at large were overwhelmingly supportive of German unification, which they accepted as a matter of course, a reality which mirrored the effect of Franco-German reconciliation and cooperation in the long run and which evidently had a bearing on government policies: hence, according to a poll made late November 1989, 71% of the French believed that German unification was desirable (against 15% of the opposite opinion), a figure which did not change substantially in the following months; see Brand-Crémieux, Les Français, 33 ff. (the French approval rate, it should be underlined, is comparable to that measured in the US, and in sharp contrast to that in Britain).


[49] On France and the two plus four, see the account by the French chief negotiator, Dufourcq, “2 + 4” (Dufourcq’s recollections are amply confirmed by the archival evidence: see Bozo, Mitterrand, 211–99); on Mitterrand’s role in the NATO membership issue, which was at the centre of discussions during his visit in Moscow on 25 May 1990, see the transcript of his conversation with Gorbachev, private papers, and Gorbachev’s own recollection in Wie es
war, 131 ff. (on Attali’s misleading account of the meeting, see also above, note 13). Although the dominant narrative gives all the credit for the Soviet acceptance of a unified Germany’s NATO membership to the Bush administration, Mitterrand — by essentially arguing that there was no other choice for Moscow — did play a significant role to that effect, as confirmed to the author by Gorbachev’s former aide Anatoly Chernyaev.

[50] Although the disintegration of Yugoslavia may be seen as the first chapter of a new, post-Cold War era, it is worth noting that Mitterrand’s basic approach to the conflict stemmed from essentially the same set of premises as was the case for the events of the end of the Cold War and German unification; see e.g. a note for Mitterrand in which Védrine makes the case for a treatment of Yugoslavia’s ‘de-unification’ along the lines of Germany’s unification, i.e. within an international framework ensuring its ‘democratic and pacific’ character: private papers, Note pour le président de la République, Votre diner avec le chancelier Kohl. Yougoslavie, 3 December 1991. (Mitterrand’s record against the backdrop of the disintegration of Yugoslavia has been, to this day, as controversial as in the case of German unification, with the dominant narrative — again wrongly — holding that French diplomacy simply tried to oppose the inevitable breakup of the federation: see e.g. Cohen, Mitterrand.)

[53] See e.g. Cohen, Mitterrand, 373–4.
[54] While granting that he at times ‘personified’ French traditional anxieties in particular vis-à-vis Germany, Védrine argues that the French president above all attempted to ‘exorcise’ such fears: Védrine, Les Mondes, 445 (this reading of Mitterrand’s now and then exaggerated expressions of worries — which abound in Attali’s Verbatim — is, the author believes, validated by the archival documents, which help setting them in context).
[57] While Mitterrand has been — again wrongly — accused of at least implicitly condoning the coup, it is worth noting that his attitude at the time and in the next few months was guided by the same objectives as those of George Bush, i.e. to avoid a disorderly dislocation of the Soviet Union: see Bozo, Mitterrand, 363–71. For an interpretation of Mitterrand’s attitude as stemming from a willingness to preserve the integrity of the Soviet Union at all costs, see Daniel Vernet, “Mitterrand, l’URSS et la Russie”, in Cohen, Mitterrand, esp. 41.
[58] On this, Bozo, “France, German Unification and European Integration”.
[59] Mitterrand asked this question bluntly to Genscher on 30 November, i.e. two days after Kohl’s announcement of his ten-point plan for German unification, which had little to say about the pursuit of European integration and had come on top of Kohl’s letter of the previous day which signalled the chancellor’s unwillingness to defer to Mitterrand’s timetable for the summoning of the IGC: see AD, Europe 1986–90, RFA, box 6800, Telegram Diplomatie 25193–94, 4 December 1989; and Genscher, Erinnerungen, 676 ff.
[61] Bitterlich, “In memoriam Werner Rouget”.
While firm on the need for a CFSP and on the longer perspective of European defence, Mitterrand was essentially pragmatic on the implementation of the concept, as showed by his attitude throughout the negotiations among the Twelve during the year 1991: ‘things are blurred, the text [of the treaty pertaining to CFSP] is more complicated, more confused’, he recognized in December 1991, while adding: ‘this is quite normal, for we are not going to build a [European] diplomacy at once’: private papers, meeting between Mitterrand and Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitsky, 3 December 1991.

On this unique episode of French–US rapprochement, see Bozo, “Un rendez-vous”; see also the stimulating analysis in Hutchings, American Diplomacy, 271 ff.

On this, see Rey, “Europe is our Common Home”; and “Gorbachev’s New Thinking and Europe, 1985–1989”, in Bozo et al., Europe.

On this, see Thomas, The Helsinki Effect; and Andréani, Le Piège.

On this, see Bozo, “France, German Unification and European Integration”, as well as Helga Haftendorn, “German Unification and European Integration are but Two Sides of One Coin”, and N. Piers Ludlow, “A Naturally Supportive Environment? The European Institutions and Germany Unification”, in Bozo et al., Europe.

See Patrick Salmon, “The United Kingdom and German Unification”, in Bozo et al., Europe.

See Bozo et al., Europe; and Cox, “Another Transatlantic Split?”

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