

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

No. 256

Published on 28 January 2010

H-Diplo *Diplomatic History* Article Review Editors:
Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Frédéric Bozo. “‘Winners’ and ‘Losers’: France, the United States, and the End of the Cold War.” *Diplomatic History* 33:5 (November 2009): 927-956.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR256.pdf>

Review by **Christian Wenkel**, German Historical Institute, Paris

The commemoration of November 9, 1989 during the autumn of 2009 raised a large amount of interest concerning the external aspects of German unification. In particular, the publication of the Foreign Office papers on Britain and the German Unification¹ launched a highly political debate in France on the role and position of the French President François Mitterrand in this affair. The main questions in this debate were, (1) had Mitterrand supported the Germans on their way back to national unity and, (2) why did he not launch a Franco-German initiative (or at least offer an enthusiastic speech) in favour of German unification. For someone who has studied the presidential records on this topic, these questions seem rather distant from the preoccupations of French foreign policy decision makers, including the President himself. If German unity was a clearly admitted objective of French foreign policy over the decades, the real question had become how to realize it under the changing circumstances of 1989/90. The first focus of French diplomacy was therefore Moscow (not Bonn or Washington) and one of the most important questions was how to manage the Soviets and how to stabilize Gorbachev's policy of opening and reforms. But Mitterrand also knew that the main game in this affair was to be played between the two superpowers. Accordingly, his trip to the GDR in December 1989 reflected French preoccupations to be involved in the concrete realisation of German unification as a part of the forthcoming European unification. In this perspective, his trip could even be interpreted as a success. If it is difficult to compare American and French foreign policy because of their very different points of departure and their different aims during the end of the Cold War, Frédéric Bozo's conclusion that they should not be analysed in terms of winning or losing, seems, for the same reason, to be correct.

¹ *Documents on British policy overseas*, Ser. 3, Vol. 7: *German unification, 1989-1990*, ed. by P. Salmon, K. A. Hamilton and S. R. Twigg, London (Routledge) 2009.

Frédéric Bozo has a very intimate knowledge of French foreign policy during the last years of the Cold War. Opening his article with the observation that American historians and specialists of international relations are largely influenced by the status of hyper-power of the United States during the last two decades, he calls for a re-evaluation of the French as well as the U.S. position in overcoming the Cold War. But his article can even be read as a reaction to the recent debate in France. Bozo analyses the two policies and the interactions between them during three subsequent periods: the last decade of the Cold War, German unification and the immediate post-Cold War era up to the collapse of the Soviet empire. In the first part he stresses the different strategies of the two powers regarding their relations to the Soviet Union on the one hand and the good understanding between Mitterrand and Reagan on the other. He insists in particular on the year 1984 as a watershed, an event that seems directly linked with the evolutions of 1983. He shows that from this time on, the French President played the role of mediator between the United States and the Soviet Union. But even if Bozo's critical analysis is persuasive, it is only based on circumstantial evidence, since the archives of all the three states concerned are not fully accessible. Concerning German unification, he proves with relevant French documents that there was no fundamental Franco-American divergence and shows a certain parallelism concerning the efforts of Washington and Paris to embed a united Germany in NATO and the European Union. In this domain, Paris undoubtedly had a reasonable influence, but there seems to be no evidence that the pressure of Paris led Bonn to officially accept the Oder-Neisse line. As for the third period, Bozo demonstrates the return to ancient divergences and rivalry, a source for the dominant American interpretation on France's role during the 1980s. Above all, the main question is how to evaluate the role of France in international relations during the second half of the twentieth century: in terms of power, or in terms of influence. This question was recently raised in a fundamental study by Maurice Vaisse on French foreign policy from Charles de Gaulle to Nicolas Sarkozy.² Bozo's article shows very well that the power of France in overcoming the Cold war was a power based on influence.

Incidentally, the article contains insights on a major problem of historical research on very recent history in France. If normally historians may ask for special permission to see documents before regular declassification, not all of the most important documents can be found in the archives, neither in those of the Quai d'Orsay nor in those of the Elysée, because they are still held by former diplomats or politicians. Thanks to Bozo we know at least about the existence of some of these documents, for example the quoted minutes relating the conversations that Mitterrand had with other statesman. But so long as these documents are not accessible for all historians working on these questions, it seems only partly possible to comprehend the French position and the French influence in these affairs – even if we can largely trust in Bozo's stimulating interpretation.

Christian Wenkel is a research fellow at the German Historical Institute in Paris. Having finished a Ph.D. on Franco-GDR relations in 2008, he is currently working

² Maurice Vaisse, *La Puissance ou l'influence? La France dans le monde depuis 1958*, Paris (Fayard) 2009.

H-Diplo Article Review

on French foreign policy during the so-called “Second Cold War”. His field of research covers East-West relations and parliamentary diplomacy as well as the history of European Integration. He is also teaching the history of International Relations at Sciences Po Paris.

Copyright © 2010 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.