

 **Article REVIEW**

**Helen Parr.** “Saving the Community: The French Response to Britain’s Second EEC Application in 1967.” *Cold War History* 6.4 (November 2006).

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Published by *H-Diplo* on 17 February 2007

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**F**ollowing her engaging monograph *British Policy towards the European Community, 1964-1967: Harold Wilson and Britain’s World Role*, in which she chronicled Wilson’s unsuccessful attempt to lead his country into the Common Market, Helen Parr has produced an equally stimulating article on the ‘other side’ so to speak – analysing France’s decision to veto Britain yet again in 1967. By doing so, she is filling a relative historiographical gap, since too many authors have tended to treat the second *non* as an inevitable by-product of the first, more covered, one in January 1963. Her piece is based on a very thorough use of recently declassified French diplomatic archives, as well as the latest scholarship on the subject.

The article is divided into two main sections, with the first one a long historiographical discussion. Parr is keen to argue that the second veto mattered, and in respect to the wider debate about France’s objections to enlargement, she ‘ascribes greater importance to political determinants’, thereby countering the economic emphasis of the likes of Alan Milward and Andrew Moravcsik. This is not to say that the author ignores the existence of an economic case against Britain joining the European Economic Community (EEC). Firstly, not only did the French believe that Britain would be unable to accept the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but they also feared that the other members, especially West Germany and Italy, would try to revisit the system either during negotiations or after Britain’s entry. As Parr points out, ‘the retention of the CAP in its current form was essential’ for Paris, and it had already led to a major dispute in previous years – the so-called ‘empty chair crisis’ of 1965-1966.

Moreover, France’s attitude towards Britain’s industry was ‘characterised by a blend of fear and contempt’. Whilst officials worried about the latent strength and possible competition in some domains from British industry, they equally believed that the latter was in the midst of a process of long decline. Allowing the ‘sick partner’ to enter the EEC could therefore lead to economic instability. Finally, Paris also approached the problems of the pound sterling and the British balance of payments deficit in an ambivalent manner. Besides Article 108 of the Rome Treaty which allowed a country in balance of payments difficulties to ask for help, creating the possibility that ‘entry into the EEC could lead the British out of trouble’, Paris also feared the fact that ‘Britain’s strength and experience in financial affairs would compromise France’s ability to take the lead in establishing a European monetary policy’.

Nevertheless, despite outlining this economic case against London, Parr reverts to the thesis that political considerations proved decisive when it came to vetoing Britain’s application. Paris was essentially determined to preserve its leadership and influence within the Community, because this in turn would ‘make an advantageous economic settlement easier to attain’, and enhance ‘the likelihood of a future political grouping to France’s liking’. Furthermore, the author disagrees

with Maurice Vaisse's argument according to which the French President, General Charles de Gaulle, had lost interest in the late 1960s in the political configuration of the EEC. Rather, as Parr points out, the construction of a political body in the EEC may not have been the main priority of French foreign policy in this period, but it still remained central to its international position and posture in the Cold War. Perpetuating the existing EEC was vital for De Gaulle's goal of overcoming the East-West division in Europe and creating a new order, because 'only a French-led Community of Six would exclude direct American influence' from the Continent.

The second section of the article focuses on French diplomacy in 1967 and its efforts to keep Britain out of the European Economic Community. Paris took little time to select its strategy. Determined to avoid a repeat of the prolonged negotiations of 1961-1963, and a paralysis of the Community, Olivier Wormser, French Ambassador in Moscow and former head of the Quai d'Orsay's *Direction des Affaires Économiques et Financières*, argued in April that it would be best to veto talks with Britain. While this would undoubtedly cause a crisis, Wormser pointed out that the crisis would be far less serious if they nipped 'the affair in the bud'. In the following months, the French made their position clear to both their partners of the EEC and to Britain. After meeting De Gaulle in June 1967, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson was convinced that it would be impossible in the short-term to overcome the opposition of the French President.

However, this did not mean that London had given up on membership in the long-term, quite the opposite. Wilson was determined to put the French under pressure, or to use his favoured rugby analogy, to kick the ball deep into the opponent's half. This proved a success. After the European Commission's report in late September 1967, which acknowledged certain difficulties with enlargement but nonetheless recommended that negotiations with Britain should start, France found itself in a difficult position. As Parr explains, it needed to 'find a method to reject Britain acceptable to opinion in the Community', and so prevent the risk of paralysis. When Britain finally devalued the pound sterling on 18 November, De Gaulle believed he had found an opportunity to do just that. During a press conference nine days later, the French President announced that he was vetoing Britain's application yet again. As expected, there was no repeat of the major crisis of 1963, but this was a pyrrhic success for Paris. London's application remained on the agenda, and it quickly became obvious that Community affairs would make no meaningful progress until the 'English question' was settled.

Helen Parr has written a convincing piece, and one that is likely to stimulate further debate. While historians still do not have access to the De Gaulle private papers – and let us hope that one day the General's son stops being so protective – more and more documents are being declassified, which help to shed light on France's objections to enlargement. For example, the papers of Michel Debré, as Minister of Finance between 1966 and 1968, are now available at the *Fondation Nationale de Sciences Politiques* in Paris. Equally, considering the fact that De Gaulle used the devaluation of the pound sterling to veto Britain's application, the Archives of the French Ministry of Finance also offer new avenues of research for this subject.

Moreover, Parr is also right to stress the links between European integration and the wider Cold War. Ultimately, from the French point of view, the British question was always closely tied to other vital issues. Thus, the French government hoped that by helping West Germany's *Ostpolitik*, it could guarantee the latter's support on Western matters, including the question of

enlargement. Similarly, France's tactical dilemma in fall 1967 was one that was compounded by wider developments in the Western world. Paris was trying to guarantee the support of its five EEC partners for the reform of the international monetary system, whilst at the same time vetoing Britain's application to join the Common Market and opposing the Harmel Exercise to strengthen the Atlantic Alliance, two policies that were inimical to the interests of the Five. In the end, as Frédéric Bozo and James Ellison argue, the French compromised on the Harmel Exercise, in part because they did not want to offend unnecessarily their EEC allies, and in part because they gave priority to the European Community over NATO.<sup>1</sup> Highlighting the weakness of the pound sterling, on the other hand, was an attempt to kill two birds with one stone. Not only was it meant to show that Britain was not ready to join the EEC, but it was also a way of denouncing the limits of an international monetary system based on two reserve currencies – the dollar and the pound sterling – and calling for a reform that would allow a greater voice to the European Community.

Once again, this is a very well-written and well argued article, and I warmly recommend it to any scholar interested in the Cold War and European integration.

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse*

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<sup>1</sup> See Bozo, Frédéric, "Détente versus Alliance: France, the United States and the politics of the Harmel Report, 1964-1968", *Contemporary European History*, 7.3 (1998); Ellison, James, *Anglo-American Relations, the Atlantic Alliance and Europe in Crisis, 1963-1969*, forthcoming.