

Franco-German Relations: Europe's Unifying Force?

“The Franco-German relationship clearly remains the backbone of Europe's future.”

- Michelle Alliot-Marie, French Minister of Defense
and Peter Struck, German Minister of Defense

I. Introduction

For many years Germany and France were rivals and enemies that could hardly keep themselves out of each other's territories. Invasions, wars, and diplomatic disputes happened very often in the Franco-German region, and consequently any thought of a permanent peace agreement was virtually unthinkable, let alone some kind of cooperation between the two countries. This historical scenario notwithstanding, recent decades have witnessed a rapprochement between the two nations as a result especially of the development of the European Union. The quotation at the top of this statement duly echoes such an approach and forces one to wonder: could this relationship truly be the basis for a much more integrated Europe? Are both France and Germany integrated enough with each other that one may envision them as the main propelling force of a politically and economically united European Union? My research project will try to substantiate the ministers' quotation and thus provide information on how, throughout the years, the two republics have moved towards a path of close cooperation that has resulted in a large share of power within the European Union.

II. Background Information

France and Germany are and always have been “an unlikely couple,” as Michael Stürmer points out (“France-Germany, 1983-1993” 21). From the very start of the Wiederaufbau program, there was a constant fear in Paris that its Eastern neighbor would

upset the European map again. Thus France wanted to contain Germany by embracing it. It was a realistic strategy, as Patrick McCarthy says, “not primarily an alliance of two friendly powers against outside forces, but rather a way to control the other and for the other to control itself...” Both countries were also trying to keep the Soviet Union out of their policies and territories and to limit American influence on European soil. This last point was more prominent in French minds like that of Charles de Gaulle, who during his presidency sought in the Franco-German partnership a means of constructing a Europe that would serve as an arbiter between British and Soviets. The political situation changed, however, with the division of Germany and the creation of an American-influenced West Germany that became a rearmed economic power (“France-Germany, 1983-1993” 2-5). France therefore took an interest in seeking Germany’s friendship in order to reinforce the defense of Western Europe and to participate in the Federal Republic’s economic success (Guyomarch, Machin, and Ritchie 20). Bonn’s position was nevertheless divided between those who hoped for close cooperation with the United States and those who saw France as a means of legitimizing and strengthening the German nation-state. Among the latter was the Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who ultimately signed the Elysée Treaty with de Gaulle in 1963. The importance of the treaty notwithstanding, the Bundestag subordinated it to the country’s obligations to NATO mainly as a result of Britain’s failure to enter the European Community because of de Gaulle’s veto (“France and Germany in the 21st Century” 12). The 1960s and 1970s thus saw a stagnation of the provisions contained in the treaty, and the 70s were a time of political worry for France, as it saw a more assertive and powerful Germany that could disregard close cooperation with its neighbor. Nonetheless, French-German cooperation moved forward with the arrival of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in France and of Helmut Schmidt in Germany who emphasized the nations’ economic and financial relations and enhanced their security partnership. The 1980s were the arena for the relaunching of their military cooperation as a way to counteract Europe’s dependence on an unreliable America that seemed to be heading towards collusion with the USSR. The fall of the Wall, however, threatened France’s cherished European balance of power, as Germany’s population now outnumbered that of France; the former was geographically bigger, and its economy was larger. The relationship was further strained by France’s

interest of appearing as a superpower during the Gulf War and Germany's wish to avoid involvement in any armed conflicts. Likewise, they disagreed on the actions to undertake in the former Yugoslavia, and therefore their cooperation played a relatively unimportant role in the conflict (Gordon 15-66). Most recently, France and Germany have grown closer as a means of ensuring a prevalent leading position within the enlarged EU that would counteract other demographically large countries' impact on European policy. Such closeness was especially prominent thanks to both countries' denial to participate in President Bush's war against terror in Iraq, a position chosen because of the many internal political interests they want to preserve.

III. Course of Study

My deep interest in Germany encouraged me to apply for this grant. From a very early age I realized the central role Germany has played in the world. The dramatic transformations the Federal Republic went through in its struggle to achieve unity left a visible mark on European history. After all, Germany has always been at center stage because of its geographical location and the immense political, defense, and economic power it later achieved. Germany was also in the middle of a dispute for world domination in the Cold War era, and the consequent division it suffered made it the ideal arena for a clash of ideologies.

I should also mention the firm belief that German academia is one of the best in the world and that I would therefore like to immerse myself in it. Würzburg will undoubtedly be a very good exposure to a German academic setting, but I would like my second stay in the Federal Republic to be an opportunity to get significantly acquainted with and acquire hands-on experience with the country's intellectual resources. Last, German academic institutions would provide me with more information on my chosen topic than American ones since usually they have larger and more numerous research centers focused on European integration issues.

In order to undertake my research project, I would like to attend the Free University of Berlin. Since Berlin is the center of Germany's political power, the point where national, regional, and local powers meet and often collide, this fact would allow me to observe the latest events as they are happening. Likewise, since Germany is by far

the European Union's economic motor, Berlin attracts much attention as a center for conventions and summits dealing with the European political and economic apparatus. Furthermore, Berlin is a metropolis formed by years and years of historical conflict that left an everlasting impression in the city. As a result, one can now admire marks of the past such as the Emperor William Memorial Church, the Brandenburg Gate, and some remnants of the Wall, all witnesses to the political turmoil Germany has experienced as an empire, a republic, a dictatorship, a divided country, and now as a democratic federal republic. Finally, Berlin offers the extraordinary opportunity to get the point of view of both *Ossis* and *Wessis*, that is, East and West Germans, on the role their country is playing alongside France. This last point is especially enticing, as nowhere else in Germany could I be more able to grasp and contrast more accurately the significance of this new partnership according to the still differing feelings of East and West Berliners.

IV. Resources

I picked the Free University because of the fascinating courses it offers and the magnificent resources I could use for my project. Indeed, as a matriculated student I will be able to sign up for courses such as "Political Economy under the Special Conditions of European Integration," "People's Rights and the UN in War and Peace," and "Democratic and Federal Implications of the (Draft) Constitutional Treaty," "German Foreign Policy," and "European Political System." In addition, the University Library, the Digital Library and its electronic journal, dissertations, and publications, and the Online Catalog make any research project easier thanks to the large amounts of information they possess. In addition, I could visit the Jean Monet Center for Excellence at the Freie Universität and obtain legal, economic, political, social, and historical information on European integration issues. Moreover, I could have access to the resources of the Center for Transatlantic Foreign and Security Policy at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the Free University. Dr. ..., a prominent professor, has expressed his willingness to let me have the Center as one of my main research sources upon examination of my project proposal.

Berlin's position as the Federal Republic's capital will allow me to be close to museums, libraries, research centers, and political institutions. For instance, I would like

to visit the German Historical Museum and appreciate more in depth the drastic political transitions Germany had to experience. Likewise, the prospect of drawing valuable information from the collections of the Central and State Library of Berlin makes me realize the great potential of my project. Finally, I would like to attend the Bundestag public hearings in order to keep myself up-to-date with the current events affecting European policy.

V. Work Plan

Once I am in Germany, I plan on exploring the following items according to the following timetable:

- Historical background: The political and economic conditions leading to the signing of the Elysée Treaty – October through November 2005
- Economic policy: The special economic interests these two nations have in common – December 2005, January through February 2006
- Political policy: Their vision of a closely integrated political union vis-à-vis that of the other member countries – March, April, and May 2006
- Foreign policy: The political reasoning behind a common foreign policy that has lately conflicted with that of the United States – June through July 2006
- Social opinion: Any contrasting views between the West and East Germans regarding their country's strong bonds with France – August through September 2006

VI. Career Goals

Once I am back from Germany, I plan on attending graduate school as soon as possible. I thus hope that by that time I will already have been accepted at New York University. I plan on using my hands-on experience in Germany as a valuable card for admission to the Master's Degree in Global Studies this university offers. If everything goes well, I will have completed my degree by mid-2008 at the age of Q. I also expect that during my study at NYU I will have an internship at the United Nations or at an important non-governmental organization like Human Rights Watch. The possibility of direct access to such important organizations while studying at NYU is definitely one of

the biggest pluses of this program. As a consequence, I am more than eager and ready to start accumulating research experience that can demonstrate everything of which I am capable and that can add weight to both my degree and my resume. In the end, I hope one day I can become a diplomat dealing with American-European issues and an expert on Franco-German history and politics.

VII. Works cited

Gordon, Phillip H. France, Germany, and the Western Alliance. San Francisco: Westview, 1995.

Guyomarch, Alain, et al. France in the European Union. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

McCarthy, Patrick, ed. France-Germany, 1983-1993: The Struggle to Cooperate. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

----- France-Germany in the Twenty-First Century. New York: Palgrave, 2001.