

Tilo Schabert, *How World Politics is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany*, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009 [Translated by John Tyler Tuttle, edited and abridged by Barry Cooper] xx + 401 pp.; £49.95 hbk; ISBN 9780826218483

The twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall has inspired a new wave of popular accounts and scholarly works using recently opened archives and interviews to deepen our understanding of those epochal events, and re-examining conventional wisdom about some of the principal actors. One such figure is French President Francois Mitterrand, whose ambiguous statements and actions (especially his state visit to the GDR in December 1989) left many contemporaries and historians with the impression that he opposed German reunification, or at best had to be cajoled into approving it by the much more enthusiastic Helmut Kohl and George H. W. Bush. Revisionist accounts now defend Mitterrand, claiming that he favored reunification, though he also wanted to assert French interests, and that he used his relationship with Kohl to guarantee that reunification took place within a larger European framework.

That is essentially the argument presented by Tilo Schabert, a German expert on French politics and society. A member of the French Legion of Honor, Schabert was granted extensive and exclusive access to the records of the Elysée palace to produce a detailed account of Mitterrand's policies published in German in 2002. This English translation makes Schabert's work available to a larger audience, and will make it a welcome addition to the library of titles devoted to reunification.

Schabert makes good use of his access, building his analysis on interviews with Mitterrand's advisers and extensive quotations from internal memoranda and transcripts of meetings with his cabinet, government officials, and foreign representatives, including not only Kohl, Bush, and Thatcher, but a great many middle eastern and Asian visitors as well. The picture he paints is of Mitterrand as philosopher and deep strategic thinker. Using quotations going back to his election in 1981 to buttress his case against the charge of Germanophobia, Schabert's Mitterrand accepted both the historical inevitability of German reunification and the absolute necessity of embedding that process within European integration, and Schabert presents evidence of successful French efforts to influence and shape the process. Even the visit to East Berlin, the only state visit by a western head of state to the East German capital in the history of the Cold War, is here evidence not of obstructionism, but of determination to strengthen French participation in the process. (274–8) Schabert highlights Mitterrand's consultation with Kohl before, during, and after the visit, as well as France's competition with the other great powers for the political spotlight. As Mitterrand told a later interviewer, and Schabert approvingly quotes: 'Don't forget that France was one of the trusteeship powers.

I don't see why I'd have left the handling of these matters to the other three powers. The East German territory was not off-limits to me, and I wanted to make this known.' (276)

Schabert's revision of conventional wisdom is welcome. By sifting through Mitterrand's statements and actions, he is able to trace a continuity of French policy that was certainly cautious, but not obstructionist, and also to recover the historical significance of Mitterrand's historical role. For that, this book deserves close attention from scholars interested in an accurate understanding of the diplomatic maneuvering of the period.

That is not to say that the book is flawless, since the very nearness to Mitterrand threatens to become a weakness. Schabert clearly admires his subject, treating his statements with a respect bordering on reverence, often offering long quotations. For Schabert, Mitterrand is both the perfect realist, speaking in 'clear, resolute terms', as well as a visionary, 'perfectly aware of what France had to do, be, and achieve in the world'. (33) This reverence, however, leads Schabert to purport a consistency and clarity to Mitterrand that few contemporaries saw, and threatens to fall into a trap that awaits many revisionist works. It is one thing to offer evidence that the conventional wisdom is incorrect, it is another to be in such a rush to dismiss it that one never gets the sense of why it existed in the first place. If Mitterrand's support for German reunification really were as clear and unerring as Schabert wants to argue, then why has the impression of his reluctance been so tenacious? Even if one wants to argue that Mitterrand ultimately favored reunification, is it necessary to pretend that he had no reservations at all? Schabert's determination to polish Mitterrand's reputation, his heavily metaphorical language, and his overwhelming (if understandable) reliance on the Elysée documents ignore these questions. In the end the narrative, while providing a valuable corrective, is not completely satisfying.

It is unsatisfying because a large part of Mitterrand's historical fascination lies precisely in his inscrutability. His preference for sibylline utterances such as 'everything that is not impossible is possible', his disinclination to share confidences, even the carefully cultivated mystery of his biography, set him apart from his contemporaries. Thus it is so interesting to see scholars tease out his 'real' attitude toward German reunification. One cannot imagine expending such an effort on Baroness Thatcher, for example, who was usually quite willing to say exactly what she thought. Mitterrand may indeed have been a consistent advocate of German reunification, but his style, which privileged complexity and opaqueness, often obscured his intentions. One can be too subtle by half, and that can make for hard work for both contemporaries and historians. That very complexity makes him such an interesting subject, and should itself be part of the story. It would be a shame if scholars felt that vindicating Mitterrand required simplifying him.

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