France and the German Question: Avant-garde or Rearguard? Comment on Creswell and Trachtenberg

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In “France and the German Question, 1945–1955,” Michael Creswell and Marc Trachtenberg argue that previous scholarship on French attitudes toward postwar Germany has been overtaken by new evidence.1 The “more perceptive” French officials, they claim, took a decidedly progressive stance on the German question, a stance not very different from that adopted by British and American leaders. Creswell and Trachtenberg maintain that the French, far from being coerced into adopting a more liberal policy toward Germany, favored such a policy themselves and believed it was in the interest of France. What appeared to many at the time as French obstructionism was actually, according to Creswell and Trachtenberg, just a stratagem to deflect domestic political pressure. Their argument, however, rests on an interpretation that stretches the evidence beyond its tensile strength. Although it is tempting for historians to pick up the crowbar of revisionism and try to pry the conventional wisdom from its exalted place, the weight of the evidence in this case is too massive to dislodge traditional judgments.

According to Creswell and Trachtenberg, France did not advocate a repressive policy to keep the Germans down in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Instead, French leaders recognized the failure of such a policy in the interwar period and rejected the traditional axiom by which “the weakness of Germany is the strength of France.”2 West Germany would be integrated into a Western Europe in which French and West German interests coincided and in which West Germany’s freedom of action would be limited. The “more astute” French policymakers understood that an integrated West Germany would be


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a partner, not a danger, to France. Following this argument, French compliance was not just a tactical maneuver but a fundamental strategic choice. Far from being steamrolled into compliance with Anglo-Saxon policy, the French went along willingly. They did not fight West German rearmament “tooth and nail,” but were among the first to recognize the necessity of a West German military contribution. Finally, according to Creswell and Trachtenberg, the French welcomed the 1954 Paris accords because they perceived a re-armed West Germany to be in their national interest, not because their hand was forced.

Why, then, did so many scholars get it wrong? Why did French leaders seem so wary of German ambition and appear to obstruct Anglo-Saxon efforts to rebuild German strength at every turn? The answer, according to Creswell and Trachtenberg, is domestic politics. The combined opposition of Communists and Gaullists in the French National Assembly was too great to override. The centrist coalitions that governed France during the Fourth Republic had to dissemble and go along with the extremists on the right and left in acknowledging their everlasting distrust of Germany. When Foreign Minister Georges Bidault complained that the British and Americans were moving too quickly on German recovery, it was supposedly because of domestic political concerns. Is it not entirely possible, however, that Bidault was playing a game not with his domestic opposition but with his foreign counterparts? That is, was he not perhaps employing a common negotiating tactic in presenting himself as the good cop who would love to agree to terms if only his partner did not stand in the way? Konrad Adenauer was famous for using domestic political constraints to extract concessions from the allied powers. Why not Bidault? The surprising thing is not that the French acquiesced in much of Anglo-Saxon policy, but that, given their dependence on the Anglo-Saxons for economic aid and military security, they resisted it so strenuously and for so long.

Creswell and Trachtenberg argue that French leaders opposed the establishment of central administrations because they feared the Soviet Union more than they feared Germany and were worried that the Soviet colossus might dominate a unified German state. Although Soviet influence was indeed a constant concern, the greater worry was that Germans might dominate a unified German state. In rejecting the plan for central administrations, Charles de Gaulle asserted that it might be a “prelude to the reconstruction of a central German authority.” The constitution of a central government would inevitably lead to the restoration and strengthening of Germany, and,

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de Gaulle predicted, “a revived Germany would certainly eventually invade France.” Robert Schuman told the Assembly that “any plan which resulted in establishing and authorizing a central power would present to Germany a temptation and to us a permanent and growing threat.” If the French really were worried that central administrative agencies would lead to a Soviet-dominated Germany, why did they refuse to join the Bizone even after British and American governments merged their zones of occupation and after the threat of Soviet domination had diminished?6

Creswell and Trachtenberg claim that the “more perceptive” French leaders favored a moderate policy on Germany. They deny that French acceptance of a West German state was the result of arm-twisting or a fear that France would be excluded from any further influence over German affairs. This is allegedly supported by evidence of what French leaders were telling their allied partners in private. One cannot take what French leaders say in public at face value, the argument goes, because such statements are often made for the purpose of domestic political consumption. But even in private Bidault protested vigorously against Anglo-Saxon decisions to revive German industry. In a letter to U.S. secretary of state George Marshall, Bidault refused to accept that “the British Government, acting alone as occupying Power” in the Ruhr or “the American and British Governments acting together” were “qualified to act in so far as the control of mines in the Ruhr and the industrial level of Germany are concerned.” He even threatened to resign “if the decisions which are now contemplated were confirmed.” When the level of industry was nonetheless raised in September, Bidault concluded that “the German question is a lost cause for France.”8

If French officials were more candid with the allies in private than in public, they should have been even more candid in private with each other, given the posturing characteristic of state-to-state negotiations. What do these insider conversations reveal about French policy toward Germany in the first decade after the war? They indicate a grudging recognition that, as Benito Mussolini said of the Anschluss, “if one cannot prevent something from happening, it is better to have it happen with you than against you.”9

“perceptive” figures of the French foreign policy establishment urged cooperation not because of enlightened self-interest but because of Anglo-Saxon pressure and the fear of diplomatic isolation. For example, François Seydoux, the political counselor in Bonn, warned that if France remained unyielding it would have no part in the making of German policy. Seydoux recommended that France cooperate with the Anglo-Saxon because “time is working against us, and quickly.” René Massigli, the French ambassador to London, came to a similar conclusion. “Where do we find ourselves?” he asked.

In our little zone, having need of dollars to make a go of it, having need of Ruhr coal, we will be left in a short time only with the possibility of accepting what the Anglo-Saxons have already constructed, whereas by joining the system now, we have the means to make our views prevail to some extent in its organization.

Creswell and Trachtenberg argue that France agreed to cosponsor the establishment of a West German state. But French compliance with Anglo-Saxon plans was hardly voluntary. When, in early 1948, Anglo-Saxon authorities in the Bizone announced further reforms to lay the foundation of a central German government and return the Ruhr mines to German ownership, French officials were forced to re-evaluate their German policy. These reforms gutted French proposals for a decentralized political authority and the international ownership of Ruhr properties. Continued refusal to cooperate with the Anglo-Saxons on the German question would clearly have had disastrous results. J. C. Paris, the director of European affairs at the French Foreign Ministry, emphasized that France’s inflexibility in wartime negotiations over Syria showed what might happen:

What is left today of our position in Beirut and Damascus? Nothing! . . . The German question is infinitely more serious for us. Shall we let it play out under British and American influence, in a manner contrary to our interests? It would be a catastrophe.

The risk, according to an internal analysis, was that “the unification of Germany will take place, and it will take place against us.” If France did not co-


operate with the United States and Britain, Bidault warned his fellow minis-
ters, “her absence will only permit the Anglo-Saxons to take perhaps even
more extreme measures.”15 The obvious implication was that France would
have to change tactics. As Bidault informed his parliamentary colleagues: “We
know what we have to do, that is, pursue with the means left to us the tradi-
tional goals of a policy which has not changed.”16

Creswell and Trachtenberg maintain that France actually took the lead in
liberalizing allied policy toward Germany. They claim that France was the
first to press for an end to the allied military government in 1949. More
boldly, they argue that France favored West German rearmament in 1950 and
welcomed West German entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization
(NATO) in 1954. Although Schuman did propose the abolition of the mili-
tary government in Germany, his aim was not to relinquish allied control, but
to ensure greater and more lasting control over German foreign policy. In the
spring of 1949 the occupation regime was coming undone, German indus-
trial capacity was being restored, and French efforts to arrest these trends were
proving futile. Schuman was determined to offer a constructive approach, one
that presented French policy as forward looking. With the imminent estab-
ishment of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the military govern-
ment was to become redundant in any case, and the days of the occupation
statute were numbered. France was desperate to retain some vestige of allied
control. The progressive-minded Schuman favored the integration of western
Germany into a united Western Europe, but “in a context of continued strict
security controls and by keeping Germany decentralized and weak.”17 As
Schuman later explained to his party colleagues at an executive session of the
Mouvement Républicain Populaire, “the methods are perhaps new, but the
direction is unchanged.” What was that direction? “The aim of the system,”
he continued, was “to control [Germany] much more directly.”18

According to Creswell and Trachtenberg, the integration of West Ger-
many into the Western political system would “automatically” limit West
Germany’s freedom of action. American forces would provide France with se-
curity not just against the Soviet Union but against Germany as well. It is im-
portant to understand, however, that although we now tend to think of an
American military presence in Europe as permanent, it was by no means clear

p. 71.
17. Quoted in Cees Wiebes and Bert Zeeman, “Eine Lehrstunde in Machtpolitik,” Vierteljahrshefte für
18. Quoted in William I. Hitchcock, France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership
to European leaders in the mid- to late 1940s that U.S. troops would remain for long in Europe after the war. The United States had, after all, withdrawn its troops from Europe after the First World War, and U.S. forces were again rapidly demobilizing after the cessation of hostilities. Hence, French policy toward Germany was crucially influenced by the expectation that U.S. forces would eventually leave Europe. France would have to contemplate using other means to prepare for the possibility of a resurgent Germany and a hostile Soviet Union. As Robert Murphy explained in a telegram to Byrnes,

French policy is based not simply on fear of future German aggression but equally, if not more, on fear that the United States will lose interest, eventually withdraw from Germany, and that some fine morning they will wake up and find themselves face to face with the Russians on the Rhine.

We are told that the French accepted the principle of a West German contribution to the defense of Western Europe. Does this mean, as Creswell and Trachtenberg suggest, that France was in favor of West German rearmament as early as the summer of 1950? If so, French leaders must have had a remarkable change of heart. Only six months earlier Schuman had declared at a press conference that “there was not for a moment any question of reconstituting any German military force whatsoever.” A few months before that he had assured the National Assembly that “Germany has no army and she must have none. She has no arms and she will not have any.” Once again, France was compelled to give ground to the Anglo-Saxons, who were keen to bolster the defense of Western Europe. “It is of course clear,” cabled Armand Bérard, deputy high commissioner in Bonn, “that our government cannot accept German rearmament, but we cannot prevent the Americans from doing so.”

French anxiety focused on the threat of an autonomous West German army. “Is there any doubt,” queried one senior foreign-ministry official, “that the day Germany disposes once again of an armed force, its main—its only—preoccupation will be the reunification of its territory by any and all means, either through war or through entente?”

19. See, for example, Schuman’s speech to the European Assembly (Strasbourg), 24 November 1950, FFMA, series “Secrétariat Général 1945–1966,” subseries “Dossiers,” Vol. 62, in which he describes NATO as an “ephemeral alliance” with a “temporary goal.”
Why, then, did Schuman accept West German defense contributions “in principle”? Because, for the French, *en principe* connotes a purely hypothetical proposition with a low probability of realization, and because he was instructed not to accept a West German role in practice. In the middle of the New York conference of foreign ministers in September 1950, the French cabinet unanimously decided that West German rearmament would present “the most grave dangers without any real or current benefit” to French security. As far as France was concerned, West German participation was to be confined “essentially, if not exclusively to the economic sphere.” Defense contributions by the FRG were to be financial and industrial, not military. Schuman thus offered a rondo of rationales to halt the American effort to rearm West Germany: it was premature to consider the creation of West German ground forces before matériel was available to equip them; West German divisions might constitute a provocation to the Soviet Union; the allies should not be put into a position of asking the FRG for favors; Indirect economic participation would suffice until the question of a direct West German military contribution was considered; the nature of the West German regime and its commitment to the West were still uncertain (“No doubt there are men of good faith in Bonn,” Schuman acknowledged, “but there were also such men in Weimar.”). For the time being, West Germany would contribute to European defense by providing steel and matériel and by building fortified defense lines. “It was possible,” Schuman concluded, “that Germany would one day join its efforts to ours, but that day should not dawn until we are sure that this German contribution will strengthen our security and not compromise it.” Schuman wanted to defer the question of West German rearmament until a later date. Although some of his arguments were more than mere pretexts for inaction, they served this purpose abundantly well.

When the French proposed the Pleven Plan for a European army a month later, they were not taking the lead in West German rearmament but simply playing for time. A memorandum prepared by the French Foreign Ministry noted that “all of the NATO powers, except France, are rallying to the American position. Given this quasi-unanimity, the United States could be tempted to ignore our objections” and “proceed without us.” With West

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German rearmament in 1950, as with the London program in 1948 and the occupation statute in 1949, French officials understood that if they strayed too far from the Anglo-Saxon line they would risk being trampled under foot. Once again, France would have to offer a positive alternative. Bérard warned that “we cannot afford to take a purely negative posture. . . . If, as I fear, we cannot prevent [the Americans and British from rearming West Germany] we will be better off limiting the danger not by staying on the sidelines, but by insisting on our conditions and getting them accepted.”

This tactic was not the result of new strategic thinking but of a defensive cost-benefit calculus. As Schuman told the cabinet in early October, “to accept the restoration of German units is to run the risk of seeing the danger from across the Rhine reborn for certain, whereas the Russian threat which we wish to counter may not loom as large over time.” The Pleven Plan, in effect, offered cooperation without concessions. It was designed to offset obstruction with the offer of a constructive alternative that “could be simultaneously represented to the United States and Great Britain as permitting German rearmament, and to the National Assembly and the French people as preventing just that.”

When Premier Pierre Mendès France proposed a solution to West German rearmament at Chartwell in August 1954, he was not enthusiastic about the prospect of a West German army in NATO. He was, rather, attempting to salvage some fragments of control from the smoldering wreckage of a failed security policy. The meeting at Chartwell followed a disastrous conference in Brussels, where Mendès France was humiliated at the hands of the other foreign ministers and his attempts to revise the EDC treaty were soundly rebuffed. Mendès France proposed to Eden and Churchill that Britain join the six other continentals in a nonintegrated coalition along the lines of the Brussels Pact, a device that eliminated British objections to supranational integration and answered French objections to a coalition without Britain. The modified Brussels Pact would permit limits on West German force levels and

30. Minutes of cabinet meeting, 6 October 1950, French National Archives (hereinafter AN), series 4AG, box 4.
32. See Minutes of Meetings of the Six Signatories to the EDC treaty (Brussels), 19–22 August 1954, Documents diplomatiques français 1954 (hereinafter referred to as DDF 1954), Annexes, pp. 45–127. For Mendès-France’s harrowing account of the meetings, see Willis, France, Germany, and the New Europe, p. 181.
weapons that were otherwise inconsistent with NATO and would restrict arms production in “strategically exposed zones” such as West Germany. To guarantee that such limits would be observed, it was necessary to rearm West Germany within the framework of the Brussels Pact, including the United Kingdom, and of NATO, including the United States, to achieve the familiar formula of a box within a box. If the French truly favored West German rearmament, why did they not just settle on the simple NATO solution that the United States and Britain preferred? Such a system would have meant treating West Germany as an equal partner, and the French were seeking relative, not equal, gains with regard to West Germany. In the end, France managed to square the circle by securing limits on West German troop strength and a ban on West German manufacture of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, while securing an elusive continental commitment from Great Britain and a sizable U.S. military presence “as long as a threat should weigh on the Continent.”

Creswell and Trachtenberg conclude by stressing the importance of archival research, a point over which there is little dispute. In fact, my critique of their article rests largely on evidence found in newly available archival documents. The works of Cyril Buffet and William Hitchcock, which are cited by Creswell and Trachtenberg as impressive contributions to our understanding of postwar French policy, rely on these same sources and largely concur with my conclusions. Archives, however, are not a panacea, and documents rarely speak for themselves. They are subject to interpretation, and even scholars who draw on the same documentary evidence may differ honestly when attempting to produce reasonable explanations of historical phenomena. Conclusions must therefore remain provisional. That said, the revisionist argument that French policy was an avant-garde, progressive approach to Germany and was generally parallel to the policy of the Anglo-Saxons does not withstand careful scrutiny. The evidence instead bolsters traditional claims that France fought a series of rearguard actions against Anglo-Saxon policy, culminating in resigned acquiescence. The conventional wisdom thus endures and, provisionally, lives to fight another day.