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French Belligerence in the Face of German Reconstruction: 1945-1947

Todd Stocke

The close of World War Two brought new challenges to foreign relations between France and the United States. The Germans' quick defeat of France in 1940 caused a significant drop in French prestige and world power. America, meanwhile, asserted itself as a major agent in foreign affairs, especially in Europe. At the heart of relations between the two countries was the inevitable postwar German question. France, having been invaded by Germany three times in seventy years, greatly feared rebuilding the German menace. No longer could France exist "under the threat of war from a neighboring state which had so often demonstrated its taste and its talent for conquest," wrote Charles de Gaulle.¹ Due to its diminished powers, however, French goals regarding postwar Germany would prove difficult to achieve. In 1945, despite its lowered status, France received a zone of occupation in Germany and a vote on the occupation powers' Allied Control Council. French veto power in the Control Council quickly became the crux of policy disputes between France and the United States. Behind the policies of both nations lay not only a fear of German resurgence, but also the new fear of communism and the Soviet Union. French belligerency during the German occupation was not only a source of American frustration, but also proved to be a factor in the East-West split of Europe and the Cold War which followed.

Near the end of World War Two, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States convened in their "Big Three" conferences to discuss the postwar world. France was not invited to join. France considered non-invitation a slight, and, augmented by the personalities of their leaders, it became an initial source of friction between the United States and France. Charles de Gaulle, President of the French Provisional Government Franklin Roosevelt was the reason France was not included in the Yalta Conference. "I could not doubt," wrote de Gaulle, "that the explicit refusal came from President Roosevelt."²

United States Secretary of State James Byrnes, however, tells a different story of the attitudes toward France at Yalta. During discussion of whether to give France a German occupation zone, he says it was Russian Marshal Stalin who showed open opposition to the French and de Gaulle. Roosevelt apparently had to be persuaded by his advisers to wholly support France, but he was not the force behind Big Three exclusion. Complaining that de Gaulle would soon demand entrance to the Big Three conferences, Byrnes quotes Stalin as saying,

¹ Charles de Gaulle, The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle, trans. Johnathan Griffin and Richard Howard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 719.

² de Gaulle, Memoirs, 759.

[Even though] France had not done much fighting in the war, yet de Gaulle has demanded equal rights with the Soviets, the British and the Americans, who have done the fighting.³

The discrepancy between the memoirs of Byrnes and de Gaulle on French exclusion is evident. It is difficult, however, to remove national biases from the writing of the two men, thus making difficult a definite determination of the cause of French exclusion. The point to understand, though, is the mutual distaste de Gaulle and Roosevelt held toward each other and the ramifications it would have on the two countries' future cooperation.

The Big Three met in Potsdam in July and August, 1945, to further discuss the German problem. Once again the French were excluded. The conference created an Allied policy toward Germany despite France's absence, a policy with which the French had grievances. Upon invitation to the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Five Great Powers,⁴ the French Delegation responded to the Potsdam agreements. Specifically, the delegation stated,

These reservations refer to the contemplated restoration of a central Government in Germany, the reconstitution of political parties throughout Germany and the setting up of central administrative departments headed by State Secretaries whose authority would extend over the whole of German territory.⁵

It was precisely the exclusion of France from these German decisions which caused great problems in their implementation for the next two years. Simply put, because the French were not at Potsdam, they were not bound to any decisions made there. The veto they possessed on the Allied Control Council proved to be a powerful weapon.

French fear of a strong Germany was immense after the war. Foreign Minister Georges Bidault referred to the German peril as a phantom, saying, "... be aware that if the phantom is given the opportunity, it will once again put on flesh."⁶ French opposition to the Potsdam agreements focused on not allowing Germany to regain its strength through the resources it possessed within its borders. As Potsdam had not determined the fate of Germany's western frontier, France was determined to use its Control Council veto to block "any action prejudging that area's future" until the Council of Foreign Ministers made a decision on the matter.⁷ Thus, the French chose to block "the establishment of central German

³ James F. Byrnes, Speaking Frankly (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), 25.

⁴ China was the fifth country included in the Council of Foreign Ministers.

⁵ U.S. Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers: General: Political and Economic Matters: 1945 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 177.

⁶ Georges Bidault, "Agreement on Germany: Key to World Peace," *Foreign Affairs* 24:4 (July 1946): 578.

⁷ U.S. Dept. of State, General: Political and Economic Matters, 179.

services having their own right of decision . . . [which] will be generally considered, particularly by the German population, as prejudging future settlements."⁸

A crucial problem with the Potsdam agreements was the extension of Polish territory into eastern Germany. Seemingly laced with a fear of Russia, de Gaulle and Bidault argued that the extension "shifted Germany's center of gravity toward the west and therefore endangered the security of France."⁹ As the eastern German borders had been settled, France offered positions on three western German regions which it considered vital to its security. First, they requested that the Saar region again become French property. Rich in its mining capabilities, the Saar came under French control in the Versailles Treaty and still held economic ties to France. Secondly, the Rhineland-Westphalia region was recommended to be independently separated from Germany. France felt that the raw materials in the area offered Germany too much war potential and wished for it to "never again be able to serve as a zone of passage, arsenal and base for invasion."¹⁰ Finally, France called for the Ruhr area to be placed under international economic and political control. Foreign Minister Bidault referred to it as "Europe's immense treasure house" due to its many factories and great coal supply."¹¹

American authorities were notably quiet about the German region concerns of France. Documents of the two year stalemate concentrate on French obstructionism in the Allied Control Council rather than the issues they demanded be considered. The issue for United States policy makers instead became the central German administrations they were attempting to enact. Secretary of State Byrnes held that centralization did not "prejudice the eventual consideration of Germany's western frontier."¹² Additionally, he tried to soothe Foreign Minister Bidault by downplaying the independence of central German agencies, saying they "will be operating under the direction of the Control Council."¹³ Although Byrnes also assured Bidault that continued occupation was the world's best security, Bidault replied that the French "cannot ignore the fact that this occupation will eventually end."¹⁴ France, therefore, continued its opposition to German centralization until its border concerns were addressed.

As France continued to veto centralization in the Control Council, American policy makers became increasingly irate. The effect of French blocking is perhaps best evident in the communications of Lucius D. Clay,

⁸ U.S. Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: The British Commonwealth: Western and Central Europe, 1946 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 513.

⁹ Byrnes, Speaking Frankly, 170.

¹⁰ Bidault, "Agreement on Germany," 572. See also U. S. Dept. of State, General: Political and Economic Matters, 400-404.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² U. S. Dept. of State, The British Commonwealth, 497.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 513.

American Military Governor for Germany. Early in the stalemate, General Clay wrote the War Department that "further delay in establishing central administrative machinery was in fact defeating the purpose of Allied Control Council."¹⁵ He then proceeded to recommend bypassing the French through interzonal agreements with Britain and Russia.¹⁶ Clay's frustration with France led him to suggest drastic actions to coerce French compliance. During a food shortage in the French zone, Clay asserted that French cooperation "might well have eased the situation," and suggests that aid should be contingent on "a change of attitude by France to quadripartite government."¹⁷

Nearly three months later, in April 1946, Clay wrote Byrnes and Secretary of Agriculture Clinton Anderson in frustration,

Recommend French be informed that unless they prepare to concur immediately in establishment of such centralized administrative agencies, all shipments of wheat to French zone of Germany will be discontinued, and furthermore, shipments (of) wheat to France will also be discontinued if French still unwilling to agree.¹⁸

Clay's recommendation was refused. As late as July, 1947, France was still delaying American efforts, this time regarding the setting of a level of industry, and of coal organization in the Ruhr. "It is well known we have receded in the face of French position," Clay told Washington, "Soviet propaganda is already capitalizing."¹⁹ General Clay continued by asking to resign, saying, "Two years has convinced me we cannot have common German policy with the French." As long as the French resisted, there could be no economic recovery in Germany.²⁰ Clay's secret communications represent the embarrassment and anger American leaders felt which they could not, or would not, betray in their official communications with their allies, the French.

Underlying the policies and official statements of both France and the United States was a fear of communism, the Soviet influence, and Soviet military power. As early as September of 1945, Jefferson Caffery, U.S. Ambassador to France, wrote Secretary Byrnes that the French feared a central German government because "such a central government will eventually be dominated by the Russians and they will have the Soviets on their frontiers."²¹ The validity of his statement was affirmed two months

¹⁵ The Papers of General Lucius D. Clay: Germany 1945-1949, ed. Jean Edward Smith, vol. 1 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1974), 85.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 152.

¹⁸ Ibid., 190.

¹⁹ Ibid., 386.

²⁰ Ibid., 387.

²¹ U. S. Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the United States. Diplomatic Papers: European Advisory Commission: Austria: Germany. 1945 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 878.

later in a conversation he had with General de Gaulle.²² France also had to fight the strong Communist Party within its own borders. Throughout their obstructionism, the French Government claimed that if they "yielded to a planned restoration of Germany either economically or politically," the French Communists could gain the support of the people and take over. American struggles against communism rode on the saving of Germany, for, as General Clay wrote in 1947, "a communistic Germany is almost certain to result in a communistic Europe."²³

The slow resolution to the stalemate over Germany did not begin until Secretary of State Byrnes' speech at Stuttgart on September 6, 1946. The Stuttgart speech has been described as "a landmark or watershed of American policy formulation for the occupation period."²⁴ Significant to relations with France, Byrnes' speech finally announced the U.S. position on the French demands regarding western Germany territories. Byrnes conceded the French claims to the Saar, but then stated that America "will not favor any controls that would subject the Ruhr and Rhineland to the political domination or manipulation of outside powers."²⁵ Easing other fears, Byrnes also pledged the indefinite occupation of American troops.

Byrnes found the French were favorable to the United States' support of their Saar claims and pledge to keep troops in Germany.²⁶ The British and the Americans were in the process of merging their occupation zones at the time, and Byrnes admitted that the Stuttgart speech was aimed toward inducing the French to join the merger.²⁷ His move would prove politically successful because Russia continued to oppose French claims to the Saar. During 1947, France slowly abandoned the idea of an autonomous Rhineland and Ruhr. Bidault also began to relax French opposition to centralization policies.²⁸ The Moscow conference, in March and April of 1947, marked the final turning point toward the Cold War. Russian Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov opposed French proposals, which "helped persuade France to throw in its lot with the West."²⁹ France had won a modest compromise in acquiring the Saar, and eventually would join its zone with the British and the Americans. The Cold War split had begun and France became a close ally of the United States.

Both the United States and France practiced a policy of stubbornness toward reconstruction of Germany. While France repeatedly refused to

²² Ibid., 890.

²³ Lucius D. Clay, 391.

²⁴ John Gimbel, The American Occupation of Germany: Politics and the Military, 1945-1949 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1968), 85.

²⁵ Byrnes, Speaking Frankly, 191.

²⁶ Ibid., 193.

²⁷ Ibid., 197.

²⁸ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, France and the United States: From the Beginnings to the Present, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 177.

²⁹ F. Roy Willis, France, Germany and the New Europe: 1945-1963 (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University, 1965), 19.

adhere to the Potsdam agreements, America did not falter in its attempts to implement them. Through its stubbornness, however, France regained much of its power and status in world affairs. Considering the numerous French colonies around the globe, it was very important at the time to regain such recognition. The French became a much needed friend to the United States on the European continent. Behind the doctrines of both countries had been the desire to halt communism, and now, for better or for worse, they would stand together on the same side of the Cold War's "containment" policy.

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