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# A Europe of the Three: The Historical Context

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**M**y task here is to trace the relationship between Britain, France, and Germany as it has developed over the past two hundred years—a relationship shaped, I am afraid, more by antagonism and jealousy than by any kind of mutual admiration or habit of cooperation.

French, British, and German national self-consciousness has been largely determined, indeed, by conflict and contrast with one another. Let us begin with France. We have to go back to the 17th century, the *grand siècle* of Louis XIV, to find the origins of French self-consciousness and self-confidence. At that period France was the strongest military and economic power in Europe and gave the law in matters of culture to the rest of the world. Other monarchs saw in the court of Versailles a model of how to reign, women looked to Paris to learn how to dress, artists and writers how to write or paint, and mankind in general how to live. France was in fact the first Great Nation—militarily, economically, and culturally—and has never forgotten it. Even today it is difficult to visit Paris without experiencing a sense of cultural inferiority. The French themselves have no doubt that it is the greatest city in the centre of the most civilized country in the world. Occasionally one has a sneaking suspicion that they might be right.

*English* national self-consciousness was older, as any reader of Shakespeare knows, but *British* self-awareness was developed largely during the century of continuous wars with France between 1689 and 1815. It was a religious and ideological confrontation as much as military and political. Initially France embodied the forces of authoritarian Catholicism that were trying to overthrow the Protestant Succession and thus threatened Britain's

very independence. Later, as British power and empire expanded, France was the adversary who contested the command of the seas, British settlement in North America and trade in the East and West Indies, and who throughout the period threatened physical invasion. Not until 1815, with the help of virtually every other power in Europe, did Britain succeed in definitively defeating France and reducing her to the rank of a second-class power. The French were never to forget it.

Finally Germany. Until the 18th century, Germany was a geographical expression. It was simply the region in Central Europe where Bourbon and Habsburg fought for dominance and whose minor princelings, the rulers of Mecklenburg, Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria and the rest, manoeuvred between them. The aspiration for Germany to become a Nation-State developed only at the beginning of the 19th century in reaction to the humiliation enforced upon the Germans by the French during the Napoleonic conquests. Prussia was then able to put herself at the head of a German alliance as the leader of a potential new German Nation in the great *Befreiungskrieg*, the War of Liberation of 1813-14. The whole concept of "Germany," even more than that of Britain, was based upon hostility to and fear of France. It was no accident that when in 1870 Bismarck needed to mobilise the forces of German nationalism so as to pre-empt Liberal attacks on the Prussian monarchy, he did so by provoking a war with France which was to be a triumph, not just for the Prussian army, but for Germany as a whole. The new German Empire was proclaimed in the very halls of Versailles. The French were not to forget that humiliation either.

### *The World Wars*

The British watched the humiliation of France and the rise of Germany with understandable equanimity. The British and Germans seemed at the time to be natural allies. Both were Protestant monarchies, their royal families closely interrelated. Both shared the same enemies—not only France but Russia, the other threat to Britain's overseas possessions. Both recognised themselves, in those racist times, as consanguineous—industrious Teutons, as against the decadent Latins. Nevertheless the two nations drifted, at the end of the century, from friendship through guarded neutrality to bitter enmity. Fundamentally this was because a new generation of Germans, not

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content with the dominance of Europe acquired by Bismarck, aspired to the further status of *Weltmacht*, World Power, and they saw in Britain the great obstacle to their achieving it. If Germany was to fulfil her destiny, they believed, she would have to fight and defeat Britain as she had fought and defeated France, and she built a great navy in order to do so. The British naturally responded, and by 1914 each saw the other as natural adversaries. Young Germans were brought up to expect *Der Tag*, the day of reckoning with England. The British responded with a flood of light fiction depicting the horrors of an imminent German invasion. So when war came in 1914 the British found themselves fighting, somewhat to their surprise, on the same side as the French.

Anglo-German antagonism did not at first long outlast the First World War. Very rapidly thereafter the British tried to restore their links with the Germans. This was due partly to a reaction against the war itself, but partly also because the British felt, out of a sense of fair play—the most suicidal of all feelings in politics—that the Germans had been badly treated by the Versailles Treaty, and that it was all the fault of the French. Up to a point they were right: the French did indeed treat the Germans badly. But they saw them as a menace that had been only scotched, not destroyed, and believed that their security depended on keeping Germany as weak as possible for the foreseeable future. The British on the other hand believed that the security of Europe lay in the appeasement of Germany's grievances and her readmission to the ranks of peace-loving powers. In principle they were no doubt right. In practice they were unfortunate in having to deal with Adolf Hitler. But as a result, the only alliance capable of restraining German ambitions was reconstituted far too late, and in 1940 Germany gained the victory denied to her in the First World War.

It is not surprising that French opinion then turned bitterly against the British, who had not only deserted their armies but sunk their fleet into the bargain. They therefore settled down to make such peace with the Germans as they could. Indeed if the Germans had had a half-way decent government, they might then have established the leadership in Europe that they had earned by their military victories, by their industrial dominance and by the size of their population, and made it acceptable to the French and to everyone else. As it was, the regime imposed by the Nazi ideologues soon became intolerable to all but the small minority that shared their views. The Russian campaign prevented the Germans from consolidating their conquests; and American entry into the war made their defeat virtually certain.

### *The US & USSR — Complicating Factors*

But the United States was not yet seen, and did not see itself, as a permanent element in the European balance of power. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, very clearly was. The British therefore felt it necessary, in the

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immediate aftermath of the war, to provide some counterpoise both to a possibly renascent Germany and to a potentially hostile Russia, and pressed for the revival of French power as quickly as possible. France was given the status of an equal co-victor, and in 1947 Britain concluded with her at Dunkirk an alliance that, if it had come ten years sooner, might well have prevented the Second World War. A year later this was extended by the Brussels Pact to include Italy and the Benelux powers. But by this time it was clear that the danger to European security came, not from a defeated and divided Germany, but from the Soviet Union, and that nothing could balance Soviet power but the assistance of the United States. So largely on the initiative of the British, the Americans were persuaded to return to Europe and become part of the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization. With their advent, the traditional structure of European politics was transformed. In the new alliance the United States took the lead and laid down the guide-lines. Washington became the capital of the West.

### *Post-war Settlements*

The United States, however, exacted a heavy price for its participation: West Germany was to be immediately and rapidly rearmed. Understandable and necessary as this was from a military point of view, in terms of European politics it was traumatic. Barely five years had passed since the death-camps at Auschwitz had been working at full blast; now the Germans were to be welcomed back as friends and associates. The British, who had suffered least of all from the Nazi tyranny, found this just tolerable. The French did not. The French Foreign Minister, M. René Pleven, devised a plan for a European Army in which German forces were to serve in a very subordinate capacity, but even this was unacceptable to the National Assembly, and after three years of negotiation it was rejected. The alliance was only saved by the British committing themselves, in 1954, to stationing not less than four divisions on the Continent until the end of the century. Their object was not so much to contain the Russians as to reassure the French. As was

said at the time, the purpose of the alliance was to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down, and it was only under those circumstances that the French were prepared to go along with it.

Nevertheless, the feelings of the French were not assuaged. They resented their status as being only honorary members of the victorious alliance. They resented the dominance of the Anglo-Saxons, and the structure of an alliance in which English was the main language and Americans occupied the senior positions. They resented what they saw as the American betrayal of their efforts to retain their colonial possessions, first in Indo-China and then in North Africa.

Underlying all this was a contempt for the Americans themselves, and a resentment that so barbarous a people should be wielding so much power. This underlying hostility found expression with the return to power of General de Gaulle in 1958—a leader determined to restore *la grandeur de la France*, and re-establish his country in the position of world leadership that her culture, her character, and her history had earned.

This he achieved with astonishing success; partly through his own self-confidence, partly through restoring French pride in themselves. As part of this process the creation of an independent nuclear *force de frappe* was essential. Also necessary was the removal of French forces from military structures which, although based largely on French soil, were dominated by Anglo-Americans. So all NATO headquarters were evicted from French territory and France became, as it were, although still a partner in the enterprise, no longer a member of the central management.

But the most important of de Gaulle's achievements, for our purposes, was his rapprochement with the Germany of Konrad Adenauer. Only if France and Germany could overcome their traditional enmity could Europe come together as an entity independent of the United States; and such an entity would, in de Gaulle's view, come naturally under the leadership of the French. Simultaneously a European Economic Community was being created, also largely on French initiative. From the very beginning, at the Messina Conference of 1957, the Germans played a major part, but it was always the French who provided impetus and leadership, and laid down the main guide-lines. Many of the senior bureaucrats, indeed, appear to have seen in the new Europe a revised and benevolent reincarnation of the Napoleonic Empire.

### *Realigning Relationships*

How did the British and Germans react to all this? So far as the British were concerned, not well. Looking back on our attitude I feel a certain sense of shame at the resentful and reluctant fashion in which we reacted to France's re-emergence as a major actor in her own right. The rapprochement with Germany, in particular, we viewed with deep suspicion. We saw in it simply an attempt ultimately to lever the Americans out of Europe, or at the

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very least to provide an alternative focus for the Alliance. The British themselves saw the American presence as essential, not only to the military effectiveness of the Alliance—which was hard to deny—but to British status within it. It was, after all, as a co-equal ally with the Americans that the British had returned as liberators to Europe in 1944. All the other allies had either been liberated, the French no less than the Belgians, the Dutch, and the Danes, or defeated, like the Germans and the Italians. We were at the top table; as long as the Americans remained in Europe we could still bask in their reflected glory. After all, we had a “special relationship,” sharing nuclear and intelligence secrets and speaking more or less the same language. We had an uneasy sense that if France and Germany displaced the United States as the focus of the Alliance, we would be participating, if at all, at a very much lower, if not marginal level.

As for the Germans, they were naturally delighted that there should be a rapprochement with France and the old hatchet buried. They wanted to turn their backs on the old destructive nationalism that had led them to disaster in two World Wars, and they saw in the new Europe an arena in which they could peacefully expand and prosper. The French might dominate its government, but they would certainly dominate its economy. They put their weight behind the European Community with enthusiasm. But they did not want to lose touch with the Americans. They knew quite well that the United States was the real guarantor of their freedom and independence. After all, Germany was still divided and the Soviet armies were just over the other side of the wall. The French and British were all very well, but it was the Americans who were keeping the Russians out, and there was no way in which the Germans were going to swap the American guarantee for French friendship. They needed both, and they did their very best to keep them together.

So the consequence was that, between 1949 when NATO was created, and 1989 when the end of the Cold War placed its rationale in doubt, the relationship between British, French, and Germans was determined by their attitude to the United States. It was within an American-dominated alliance that all three functioned. Then came the demolition of the Berlin

Wall, the reunification of Germany, and the end of the Soviet Threat; cataclysmic events with which we are still trying to come to terms.

### *Yankees Go Home?*

What have been the implications of these events for the nations of Western Europe? The immediate effect is that there is no longer a direct threat to keep the Alliance together. Concurrently, there is no longer a need for the Americans to stay in Europe—or rather, there is no longer *that* need for the Americans to stay in Europe. There are many other reasons why they should remain, but keeping the Russians from pouring through the Fulda Gap is no longer one of them.

There is therefore a distinct possibility, if not a probability, that the Americans will now go home. The French reaction to that possibility is to press forward with the Europeanisation of the Alliance, on the assumption that the Americans are no longer needed and that anyhow they are not going to be around for very much longer—indeed, it would not be a good thing if they *were* to be around for very much longer. They are also deeply concerned about the huge potential increment of power brought to the Germans through the reunification of their country. They are therefore pressing for a restructuring of the Alliance within the framework of the Western European Union—an organisation created in the early '50s to enable the Germans to join the Alliance under strict control, and one whose membership conveniently parallels that of the European Union created by the Treaty of Maastricht.

The British, on the contrary, are doing their best to keep the Americans in and to dissuade them from going away. The WEU seems to them at best redundant, at worst a deliberate challenge to the United States to leave the Europeans to fend for themselves. As for the Germans, they are only anxious not to offend any of their allies. They accepted politely the French offer to form a joint Franco-German brigade, which has now been expanded into an Army Corps and is seen in some quarters as the nucleus of a new European Army. The Germans justify its existence as a mechanism for binding the French more closely into the alliance. The British and the Americans, on the contrary, see it as a French ploy to divide the Germans from the Anglo-Saxons. There is little desire in Washington to see the French displace them as the leaders of a European alliance, and that may indeed be a factor in persuading them to remain.

In any case, the United States is unlikely to formally withdraw from Europe before the end of the century, and so long as they retain any kind of a presence this will continue to determine the relationship between their major partners. But they are unlikely to remain forever; and we can only hope that by the time they do leave, the three major European powers will have settled into a relationship that will represent something more than an uneasy equilibrium. □