

François Mitterrand and his principle of exception française
Angelika Praus, Das Ende einer Ausnahme. Frankreich und
die Zeitenwende 1989/90 Marburg: 2014, Tectum Verlag, 539
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Mitterrand's policy towards Germany by the historical turnaround of 1989/90 is considered even nowadays highly controversial among experts. Whilst some justify his hesitations with the intention to incorporate the reunification in the process of European integration, others see this as an attempt to slow down or even to block the German unionist struggles. The sub-title already indicates that author primarily concerns issues as the attitude of the French President François Mitterrand to the Peaceful Revolution in the GDR, the Cold War and the German reunification.

There are certain key questions in the book. Why Mitterrand visited in December 1989 the doomed GDR? Why the French president refused the invitation of Helmut Kohl to walk together with him through the Brandenburg Gate? Mitterrand stood with Helmut Kohl hand in hand at the tombs of Verdun in 1984, thus one could ask why the French politician was missing support for the unity of the Germans and forced simultaneously the introduction of the euro?

France's behaviour during the German unification process and European upheavals of 1989/90 still stimulates experts to put even today several why questions related on the issue. The scientific controversy is also addressed by Praus, who presents well-known historical and political facts, but she does not contribute with new evidences on the topic. Author provides a new interpretation of the behaviour of Mitterrand during this time and her descriptive work-up relies mainly on the available literature. For instance, author involves the analysis of Ulrich Lappenküper, who published a book with the title Mitterrand and the Germans in 2011 in which he is offering a comprehensive overview on the matter.

Author stresses that Mitterrand was strongly influenced by the policy categories of de Gaulle. Brigitte Seebacher already emphasized the old thinking style of Mitterrand in the foreword of

the book. Six elements were coining this thought: the self-image as a protector of human and civil rights; the myth of the heroic resistance against Hitler's Germany; the demand for belonging to the victorious powers of World War II; the creation of an independent foreign and domestic policy; the claim for predominance in the European Community and the reinforcement of the centralised nation-state size.

Praus points out how the French president was following a political concept that had become fragile in the eighties and during the events of 1989/90 had lost any factual basis. The construct followed by Mitterrand was the idea of French exception. The special feature of the book of Praus is much more the interpretation of the attitude of Mitterrand that she embeds in a complex historical framework. The red line of her argumentation is the keyword „exception française” thus, the official French view, which means that the country represents as a nation and historical greatness a unique case in the world. According to the author, the origins of this assumption are in the 17th and 18th centuries. After that, it turns in a Gaullist myth of history of „résistancialisme” that was taken over by Mitterrand even though he lacked the legitimacy of de Gaulle. The new president implored the claim to independence, although the >> trente glorieuses << (splendid epoch of economic success of France was long over) and the fundamentals of the >> exception française << were starting to disintegrate.¹ Mitterrand insisted on the defense doctrine created by de Gaulle, albeit its core item, the nuclear weapon was losing its value.² Gradually the role of Europe becomes a visible priority in the diplomacy guided of Paris.³

The fact that the French power man also changed basic political positions during his lifetime is not a secret anymore and author criticizes predominantly that Mitterrand inherited the political line of Charles de Gaulle that he continued without hesitation. In view of that, Praus is missing the own visions of the president, thus the originality of Mitterrand's strategic guidelines as top executive. The French president failed to implement old economic models in his country and was not open to process the

¹ Praus, 2014, 105.

² Praus, 2014, 408.

³ Praus, 2014, 118.

legacies of the Vichy regime and thus reconciliation with his German neighbours was a challenge. This conservative-centralist line leads to the circumstance that he had not properly monitored the factual upheavals, which were analogously happening in both German states, but implemented all possible diplomatic tools to coerce Bonn to consider specific interests of Paris and his allies. After 1989/90, things have completely changed and the politico-historical weight of France was not anymore sufficient to compensate the errors originating from Mitterrand's traditionalist thinking. Contrary to certain different assessments, the Gaullist socialist was no visionary realist, but „a fatalist”.⁴ Thus, Mitterrand remained somehow trapped „in the past” keeping alive all the time his „historical fears” that were coining his political decisions.⁵ The president was not trying to understand the Germans in their right to self-determination and the connection with the maintenance of stability in Europe, but he only wanted to preserve the status quo of the two former German states. Only after the People's Chamber elections in the GDR in March 1990, he accepted „the unavoidable fate”.⁶

Even after the turning point of 1990 /91, Mitterrand was sticking to the mirage of „French exception” and believed he could back up Paris's rank in international relations. The French European policy was still coined by his „thinking in equilibriums”.⁷ With the European Monetary Union, he thought that the reunified Germany would be much weaker as France as it was giving up the strong D-Mark. However, the Treaty of Maastricht should not reinforce the French exception but „worsened the identity and economic crisis of the country”.⁸ Indeed Mitterrand's successors brought a part of the components of exception française „to the grave”. The ending of the „French exception” without ifs and buts is still difficult for current politicians as even President François Hollande reconfirmed that issue in 2013. Hollande: „France is a unique nation. It is more than a great history it is a project”. Therefore, author effectively outlines how the inherited French self-understanding still exerts

⁴ Praus, 2014, 189.

⁵ Praus, 2014, 218.

⁶ Praus, 2014, 257-265.

⁷ Praus, 2014, 199.

⁸ Praus, 2014, 338-370.

an influence nowadays in diplomacy and why Paris continues to have big difficulties with on-going processes as Europeanization and globalization.

The historical overview of Praus is critically designed, but ignores the fact that the constant appeal to the principles of the French Revolution – Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity – could hardly be reconciled with the durable mistakes of a rapidly growing colonial power. Besides skips to mention that, the standardization and unification of the French language under Richelieu also involved the circumstance that women were extremely marginalised. However, for the more recent history, author manages to identify the continuous contradictions between historical reality and sophisticated heroization attempts of the French central authority. Mitterrand appears in this contextual frame and is presented according to the statements of historians and contemporary witnesses who are mostly people in power.

The structure of the book is well balanced and has five main chapters⁹ constructed around the concept of *exception française*. Chapter I and III are somewhat longer in extent as the other ones. The last chapter (V) also involves the subject of „the internal crisis of France and it's changed role in Europe”.¹⁰ The edition ends with a section of closing remarks of the author that comprises a brief summary. Additionally there is a very useful list of abbreviations and bibliography. The bibliography is divided into a list of primary sources and secondary literature.

Praus is convinced that the French political leader has missed his chance to shape European policies not later than 1989/90, but from time to time she uses rather one-sided descriptions for Mitterrand, which are more as critical turning to negative as the main comparison reference is de Gaulle. Certain elucidations concerning the French president are in some way reformulations, which are weakening the argumentation. Therefore even if one cannot share all views of Praus is useful to

⁹ After the preface of Brigitte Seebacher it follows the introduction of Angelika Praus. The titles of the five chapters are: I The >> *exception française* << Charles de Gaulle and the greatness of France, II François Mitterrand: continuity within a changing world, III France and the turning point of the year 1989/90, IV François Mitterrand: in a changing world on which the >> *exception française* << remains, V Successors of Mitterrand and the >> *exception française* <<: A farewell by rates.

¹⁰ Praus, 2014, 444.

read her vast work that could have been considerably shorter if not every French citation had been converted into German in the footnotes. On the other hand, exactly these translations are increasing the authenticity of author's foreign references.



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