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Hartmut MARHOLD

The Élysée Treaty, Franco-German reconciliation and European integration: myth and reality

I. SCHUMAN VS. DE GAULLE

"During General de Gaulle's visit last week, I thought often of you, the man who, with his proposal to create the European Coal and Steel Community, laid the foundations of the friendship which would henceforth bind our two countries so closely together. I always think of our cooperation with great appreciation. I feel the need, especially in the present circumstances, to express this gratitude to you[1]," wrote the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, on 10 September 1962 to former French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman.

Konrad Adenauer was anxious to set things straight and avoid the creation of a myth. For him, Franco-German reconciliation, at the service of European integration, began on 9 May 1950 with the "[Schuman Declaration](#)". It was not going to start with the Treaty in progress, the future Elysée Treaty.

Robert Schuman, in his "*Testimony on Adenauer*", confirms this: *"When in May 1950, the French government offered to the European nations to sit down, without discrimination between victorious and defeated countries, with equal rights and obligations, for a work of joint cooperation guaranteed by mutual control, this truly political revolution required Franco-German reconciliation. Even before consulting our friends and allies, we asked Chancellor Adenauer. If he had said no, Europe and European integration could not have existed. Our expectations were not disappointed[2]."*

Three years earlier, at a solemn ceremony, Konrad Adenauer had already had the opportunity to address Robert Schuman in front of a Franco-German audience,

emphasising that it was he, Schuman, who had *"definitively put an end to the Franco-German history full of atrocities thereby creating a lasting friendship between the two peoples"*. He said: *"You, Mr Schuman, took the initiative for this great work and began to build it. That is why we are deeply grateful to you."* The Chancellor concluded by insisting that *"it was Monsieur Schuman who laid the foundations for a good and lasting understanding between France and Germany and for a European future, that Europe owed its survival to his action[3]."*

Neither Adenauer nor Schuman could protect posterity from the myth that it was the [Élysée Treaty](#), the connivance between General de Gaulle and - still... - Adenauer himself who is said to have launched the Franco-German reconciliation, a myth continually repeated and endorsed by both French and German diplomacy. On the French side, the memory of the Élysée Treaty completely erases Schuman's "great work": *"After several decades of rivalry and conflict, Germany and France were sending a message of reconciliation and laying the foundations for close bilateral cooperation in the service of European integration. [Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Charles, de Gaulle [...] now wished to reach out to their former adversary. With this treaty, the two signatories decided to establish a new relationship to seal a lasting friendship."*

The German Foreign Office is no less formal: *"After the war, reconciliation between the two neighbouring countries seemed unimaginable at first. When the future French President Charles de Gaulle invited Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to his private residence, this was seen as historically unprecedented. The aim was to*

[1] Konrad Adenauer: Letter Robert Schuman. in Marie-Thérèse Bitsch: Robert Schuman Apôtre de l'Europe. 1953-1963, Cahiers Robert Schuman, vol. 1., Peter Lang, Brussels, 2010, p. 335-337.

[2] Robert Schuman: Testimony about Adenauer. in Marie-Thérèse Bitsch; op.cit., p. 332.

[3] Moselle Archives, <http://www.archives57.com> Papers by Robert Schuman, 34 J and 36 J. 34 J 29, and https://www.cvce.eu/obj/declaration_de_konrad_adenauer_sur_l_action_de_robert_schuman_10_juin_1959_fr-db839977-49de-45cd-93ef-223a482c5f55.html

revive Franco-German relations on a cultural, economic and political level. The bilateral unification process served as a driving force for the construction of Europe and the integration process, which had begun with the Treaties of Rome and the founding of the European Economic Community[4]."

This is misinformation that has been formalised by the government authorities of both France and Germany. Obviously, European integration did not begin with the Economic Community (EEC), but with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC); obviously, the initiative that was the real "political revolution", the starting point for the reconciliation of the two nations that considered themselves "hereditary enemies", was that of Robert Schuman, and it is vital to mention Jean Monnet, the "inspiration" behind this "great work".

II. THE TRUE STORY OF THE ELYSÉE TREATY

The real story of the Elysée Treaty is quite different: when General de Gaulle returned to office in 1958, just a few months after the implementation of the Treaties of Rome, many observers assumed that he would ask for a renegotiation, a revision of these treaties - it was known that he was hostile to the Community path of European integration, because of the sovereignty sharing it would imply, which was unacceptable as far as he was concerned. But as a statesman, de Gaulle respected an iron principle of international relations: "*Pacta sunt servanda*", regardless of the change of government. Nevertheless, de Gaulle had no intention of settling for a *fait accompli* - but he could not turn back, so he decided to accelerate - on a different path, an alternative path, a path of cooperation instead of integration.

In 1961, De Gaulle therefore launched his own project for European cooperation, the '*Fouchet Plan*' (named after Christian Fouchet, the senior civil servant responsible for drafting it at the Élysée Palace), which proposed not only economic cooperation, but also consultation on the real and major issues affecting the future and survival of nations, consultation and cooperation at the highest level. The European Community and its institutions were to play the role of administrative support for the framework of cooperation between governments, and

especially their leaders. Attractive, one might say - but the other founding countries of the Communities categorically refused the General's advance: for them, the essential aspect of European integration was just its supranational character, with a federal focus - had not Schuman announced, in his speech of 9 May 1950, that the "*finality*" of his proposal "*would lay the first concrete foundations of a European Federation indispensable to the preservation of peace*"[5]?"

De Gaulle, deeply disappointed by the failure of his initiative, did not throw in the towel. In a second phase, he relaunched a similar project, but this time only for the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), speculating that he could convince Chancellor Adenauer, a statesman of the same standing as himself, fundamentally imbued by German culture, with a Francophile tendency. De Gaulle was not mistaken: Adenauer was going to accept and the General himself knew how to convince the German public: during his famous campaign through the Federal Republic of Germany, he spoke in German, having to learn his speeches word for word. He flattered the Germans, for example in his speech in Ludwigsburg: "*Ich beglückwünsche Sie ferner, junge Deutsche zu sein, das heißt Kinder eines großen Volkes*"[6]. ("I congratulate you on being young Germans, that is to say, the children of a great people"). This was what the Germans wanted to hear from the French statesman, and they applauded him enthusiastically[7]. And this time, the Gaullist initiative was to succeed: the result was the Élysée Treaty.

This treaty was therefore neither the beginning of Franco-German reconciliation, nor was it very favourable to European integration, quite the contrary: the aim was to empty it of substance and to replace the Community path with a method of cooperation that preserved the entirety of national sovereignty (French, above all), since Federal Germany had not yet recovered its full sovereignty, not to mention the uncertain status of West Berlin or its division in two.

Contrary to what one might think, the substance of the Elysée Treaty was not that of the text agreed with such pomp and circumstance on 22 January 1963 - the final content was quite different, much to the regret of General de Gaulle and the more tempered regret of

[4] German government site; <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/elys%C3%A9e-treaty-2159314> (author's declaration)

[5] Robert Schuman, [Declaration of 9 May 1950](#)

[6] Charles de Gaulle [speech of 9 September 1962](#), Ludwigsburg, (author's translation)

[7] The anecdote is that Adenauer, listening to de Gaulle, is said to have thought that the enthusiastic Germans would have liked to have had de Gaulle as Chancellor, while de Gaulle is supposed to have thought that he would have liked to have had an equally enthusiastic people...

Chancellor Adenauer. During the ratification of the treaty, the German Parliament added two protocols, two texts that were to empty the it of its substance - at least the substance that was important to General de Gaulle. The first of these protocols enthusiastically welcomed the treaty's contribution to Franco-German friendship, but insisted that the way forward for European unification was the Community way, which must not be undermined or hampered by any bilateralism - exactly what de Gaulle wanted. The second protocol welcomed the deeper dimension of Franco-German understanding, but insisted that the security and defence of the Federal Republic could rest on any other reliable basis than the Atlantic Treaty, i.e. the United States - thus sabotaging the General's second objective, which was to reduce European dependence on the United States and aim for an autonomous European defence.

Stripped of its two strategic components, the Elysée Treaty was no longer worth much, at least in the eyes of General de Gaulle. This was followed by an exchange of personal letters with the Chancellor, in which he waxed lyrical as he expressed the deep bitterness of an old statesman: de Gaulle complained that young love withers before it even blossoms; Adenauer, a rose grower, replied that some flowers require patience, that their blossoming and flowering is the work of several generations.

By not insisting on the renegotiation of the Community Treaties out of respect for the fundamental principles of international law General de Gaulle failed not only with his multilateral alternative - the Fouchet Plan - but also with his bilateral project, the Élysée Treaty. Powerless to steer Europe towards his own goals, he was still powerful enough to prevent Europe from moving forward in a direction he believed unacceptable. When the President of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein, a German jurist and federalist who negotiated the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, announced in March 1965 that preparations were well advanced to make the qualitative leap to the Common Market - as promised in the Treaty of Rome establishing the Economic Community - by moving from unanimity to qualified majority voting, General de Gaulle vetoed it: the French President would never accept a law passed by a supranational body against France's will. French ministers

and senior officials would no longer attend meetings of the European institutions, following the General's orders. This was the "crisis of the empty chair". Without the French, no decision could be taken. The completion of the Common Market was postponed[8].

III. THE PARADOXICAL VIRTUE OF THE ELYSÉE TREATY

Was the Elysée Treaty a failure then? Far from it. Although it did not correspond to the initial agenda of its author, it had important and beneficial effects, precisely because the Bundestag had deprived it of its destructive potential with regard to European integration and defence. The paradox of this treaty is that it was able to generate a positive impact because it had been mutilated.

This is true first in terms of cooperation between the two countries' national institutions. On the contrary, it set in motion mechanisms for consultation and cooperation between France and Germany which, instead of isolating them from their European partners and committing them to selfish bilateralism, proved extremely fruitful for the Communities and, later, for the European Union. Regular, formal meetings between ministers, between governments in their entirety, between parliamentarians, and many other formats of meetings at all decision-making levels of the two countries, have embedded in the genetics of the institutions and their staff a "DNA" that - if not always, then very often - leads to making contact, talking to each other, understanding each other before taking unilateral initiatives.

Of course, this does not mean easy harmony between France and Germany - the virtue of the consultation formats resulting from the Élysée Treaty has rather the function of encouraging the elites of both countries to work on compromises in the many cases of divergence. The invaluable positive effect lies in the education of the elites, the experience of these consultations, to see each other not as antagonists but as complementary. The experience of these cooperation frameworks has taught civil servants and politicians in both countries to understand that agreements reached by taking the other's position into account have often been the necessary condition for reaching European decisions.

[8] Concerning NATO: Not having been able to substitute a European defence organisation for the transatlantic Alliance, General de Gaulle could at least remove France from the NATO military structure and expel the headquarters from Paris. Hence NATO's headquarters in Brussels.

A necessary, yet not a sufficient condition: this is the humble contribution granted to the Franco-German couple thanks to the insertion of the Élysée Treaty in a process of European integration according to the Community method - contrary to its initial intentions. By facilitating the quest for Franco-German conciliation, the Élysée Treaty has rendered a very important service to European integration, to the benefit of all members of the European Union.

But this is only one of the positive effects of the Elysée Treaty, which has also opened up an important field of action in terms of civil society. It has affected the lives, experiences and futures of many French and German citizens. The prime example is the Franco-German Youth Office (OFAJ), which has encouraged nearly ten million young Germans and French to meet each other to improve the understanding of their neighbour. There is therefore good reason not to underestimate the contribution of the Élysée Treaty to Franco-German reconciliation, even if this began thirteen years earlier on the initiative of Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, a reconciliation that has turned into a true friendship among a large number of young people – who are not so young today - many of whom have taken on multiplier roles.

The potential of the Elysée Treaty has not been exhausted and remains valuable, as the many stages in the development of the treaty have shown. One example is the "Blaesheim process", named after a commune in Alsace, which in 2001 led to an increase in political meetings at the highest level - chancellor, president, prime minister, fortnightly meetings in addition to the twice-

yearly summits between the two governments. It was the Elysée Treaty that inspired the [Aachen Treaty](#), signed on the 56th anniversary in 2019 sparking a new drive for greater understanding in both countries. The Aachen Treaty aims to improve knowledge of both languages by supporting initiatives that target bilingualism, especially in border regions.

Other examples could complete the picture of the successes and benefits of the Élysée Treaty, which is a unique example (alas ...) of friendly understanding between two countries that considered themselves hereditary enemies, i.e. forever, for centuries and centuries. But the construction of Europe, launched by Robert Schuman and wholeheartedly supported by Konrad Adenauer, is also unique and preceded the bilateral treaty, committing France and Germany to a European path that the Élysée Treaty did not, fortunately, challenged but confirmed. Once we have corrected the error of crediting the Élysée Treaty with having been the start of Franco-German reconciliation, we have many reasons to pay it tribute, to rejoice in it, to continue to develop it and adapt it to new challenges, and never to forget that the friendship between France and Germany is far from self-evident. It owes much to the statesmen who had the courage to "take a leap of faith^[9]" of friendly relations between former enemies.

Hartmut Marhold

Honorary Professor at the University of Cologne
Senior Research Fellow, Centre international de
formation européenne (CIFE)

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[9] With these words Robert Schuman confirmed the question of a journalist who was interviewing him after the press conference on 9th May 1950. The quote became the title of Victoria Martin de la Torre's book : [L'Europe un saut dans l'inconnu](#), éditions l'Harmattan, 2021. The Council has produced a documentary video entitled "[Europe through the generations](#)"; the origins of Franco-German reconciliation are discussed.