

Radical Résistance in France: François Hollande's German Crisis

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With the nomination of the European Union in 2012, the Nobel Peace Prize Commission celebrated one of the strangest anomalies in Western history: the absence of wide-scale bloodshed in Europe for more than 60 years. The Commission attributed this success to a European Union in the throes of economic malaise. However, particular praise was reserved specifically for the nations of France and Germany and their mutual relationship of support, cooperation and leadership. Friendship between France and Germany (another remarkable anomaly in the history of Europe), which was one of the primary factors behind the European recovery after World War II, has begun, ever so slightly, to change in the face of a stagnant and far less impressive economic recovery from the most recent global financial crisis.

The new strain on Franco-German relations, and the new threat to European economic stability, is becoming particularly apparent under the presidency of François Hollande, France's current Socialist executive. As a result of German interests in implementing Europe-wide austerity policies, and the weak and seemingly ineffective centrist leadership under Hollande, significant changes seem almost inevitable. Specifically, it will be a turn for the worse, one away from

the center in France's domestic politics toward the extremities of the political spectrum and changes in France's relationship with Germany that will make for a significantly weaker European Union.

The relationship between Western Europe's two most powerful nations has historically been characterized by mutual dislike and rivalry in economic, military and territorial matters. In January of 1871, Paris was finally relieved from an unusually savage Prussian siege. That year, the humiliating end of the Franco-Prussian War and the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine — the contentious, German-speaking strip of land located on the French side of the Rhine — only exacerbated mutual dislike. Moreover, the strong French desire to establish a "natural" border with Germany on the Rhine inspired a strong French irredentist movement for the recovery of lost territory and glory. Over the next three-quarters of a century, Franco-German antipathy continued to fester, spanning two World Wars and costing the lives of millions.

France and Germany have been the two preeminent powers, first militarily and then economically, of continental Western Europe since the unification of Germany in 1871.

The two twin powers regarded conflict as so inevitable, in fact, that they created a system of alliances reaching from London to Rome to Moscow based entirely on mutual defense against each other. Animosity toward Germany was so powerful at the turn of the last century that it managed to bring France together with its perpetual rival, Great Britain. The national feeling among the French toward German control of Alsace-Lorraine was rife with hatred and revanchist sentiment. French politician Léon Gambetta's famous statement about German-controlled Alsace-Lorraine, "Never speak of them; never forget them," couldn't have been inspired by a mere desire for territory.¹ This was the mark of a definite cultural hatred and thus imbued the policy of both France and Germany from 1871 to the end of World War II in 1945 and beyond.

It wasn't until five years after the end of their most recent and bloodiest conflict that France and Germany began moving toward the friendship that's such a foundational part of European stability today. In May 1950, the French foreign minister approved a treaty founding the European Coal and Steel Community in an attempt to make the Franco-German conflict "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible."² The two nations were also founding members and

fundamental supporters of the new European Community, an organization that would eventually become one of the most important forerunners to the European Union. In 1963, with the signing of the Élysée Treaty, the two nations began working toward a more-or-less joint foreign policy, economic and military cohesion and youth exchanges. Then-Chancellor Konrad Adenauer portentously declared on the occasion, "The methods may change, but...we may never lose the trust of friends."³ For better or worse, these two perpetual rivals had thrown their two fortunes in together.

These two nations that had been fundamentally opposed to each other for hundreds of years went from rivals in World War to the closest allies in Europe in a matter of a decade, caused by a marriage of political necessity in the polarized power play between the United States and the USSR. Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, declaring that Franco-German reconciliation and friendship was inevitable, said that the alliance was essentially apolitical within France and that he "would even go so far as saying it is an existential issue."⁴ Moreover, the France-Germany alliance hasn't been undisturbed by disagreement in the past. Most notably and most fundamentally, France has historically preferred a

"*Europe des patries*" or "Europe of homelands," as Charles de Gaulle said it, whereas Germany has generally backed closer union within the EU in order to avoid that which Otto von Bismarck called "a nightmare of coalitions" directed against itself.^{5 6} Nevertheless, there's at least a correlation between Franco-German unity and political stability in Western Europe, and it's obvious that the two nations' codependence has only grown more extensive since they first combined their fortunes.

Beyond the geopolitical necessities of friendship, beyond the 320,000 French employed by German companies and the 285,000 Germans employed by French, beyond whatever mutual cultural admiration is celebrated in every meeting between their heads of state, there remains the singular fact that France and Germany, the two largest economies within the Eurozone, use the same currency.⁷ This is the strongest and best rationale for Germany's involvement in Europe and France's recent and ongoing economic malaise and one of the foremost factors in Hollande's government's increasing deference to what his opponents call "the agenda of the German right."⁸

No such accusations of defection to the right would have been made by anyone less than intimately familiar with Hollande's résumé a few years ago, when Hollande campaigned for and won the French presidency with 51.6 percent of the vote. Filling his campaign speeches with bombast such as declaring that his "enemy is the world of finance" and that he "dislikes the rich," Hollande presented himself to the 2012 French electorate as the conventional French Socialist candidate — that is to say, intensely anti-business in economic policy.^{9 10} Who could forget his broken promise of taking 75 percent taxes from the highest tax bracket?¹¹ Although Hollande has generally been pro-Europeanization and in favor of strengthened ties with Germany, his appointment of Jean-Marc Ayrault, the "virtually unknown" rank-and-file Socialist former mayor of Nantes, as his first prime minister signified little more than conventional Socialism in Hollande's formative government.¹²

Nevertheless, even during Hollande's honeymoon phase, there were still hecklers on his own side of the aisle who could recognize a pragmatist when they saw one. Dubbed by some leftist malcontents as a follower of a "socialism of adjustment," there's no doubt that Hollande places

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political viability over ideology. Only when it was beneficial to take a hard line against many of the issues French Socialists align themselves against, Hollande put himself on the winning side. Reminiscent of Bill Clinton in 1992, Hollande says that he wants to make the Socialists a "party of government" rather than of ideas, an electable institution rather than a dogmatic political club.¹³

Thus, Hollande, ever the political realist, acted only naturally in the major changes he began to phase into French policy and government staffing in early 2014. Defending what skeptical leftists called a U-turn in policy, Hollande attempted to explain away unpopular changes in budgetary policy such as a €50 billion cut in

spending and a lowering of the budget deficit to levels below the German-dictated EU standard by 2017. He called this an "acceleration" of policies already in place. As a politically pragmatic policy was already in place, Hollande has technically stayed true to his political philosophy by merely responding to changes in political necessity, from pleasing French voters to pleasing French business leaders and, more importantly, to pleasing Berlin.¹⁴

This facile dodging of the accusation that he has been inconsistent, however, doesn't manage to explain the several very real changes Hollande affected in his government in 2014. First and foremost is the replacement of Ayrault as prime

minister with a young disciple of Tony Blair from the south of France named Manuel Valls. Prior to his installation as prime minister in April 2014, Valls made French headlines for committing unusual acts, like unsuccessfully suggesting the word “Socialist” be dropped from his party’s name in favor of something sounding more modern.¹⁵ Since entering office, he has been as unorthodox as to suggest an easing of the 35-hour legal limit on the French work week and to declare at a major employers’ convention: “France needs you...I love business!”¹⁶ Another new member of Hollande’s cabinet, Minister of Economy Emmanuel Macron, is undoubtedly even more controversial with the stalwart leftists of the Socialist Party. Macron, a former investment banker, once referred to Hollande’s 75 percent tax plan as “Cuba without the sun,” and is committed to centrist reform to the point that he has said, even “if [Hollande and Valls] decide not to deliver, I will move.”^{17 18}

To look at Hollande’s political opponents at home, it would seem at first that the topic of the French-German alliance is indeed apolitical: Members of both the far left and the far right increasingly oppose it. On the far right, Marine le Pen, chairman of the National Front, has recently been more and more outspoken in

her criticisms of France’s leading foreign investor and partner in trade.¹⁹ In June 2014, Le Pen “shocked” the German press when she told them that German Chancellor Angela Merkel “thinks

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she can conduct politics contrary to the will of the people,” and that the “strong euro” that German policy is currently pursuing will “ruin” France.²⁰ Moreover, according to Le Pen, Germany has created an “antidemocratic monster” in the present European Union.²¹ Taking more of a nationalistic than a patriotic stand, Le Pen warned, “Germany should never forget that France is the heart” of the European Union.²² Her threat was made all the more ominous by the historic gains her

decidedly Eurosceptic party made in May’s elections to France’s seats in the European Parliament — a full 25 percent of the vote went to the National Front.²³

Equally as belligerent against Hollande’s regime and its policies supposedly beholden to German control is Hollande’s own recently ousted minister of economy, a noted supporter of “de-globalization” and a new, less Europeanized French Constitution, Arnaud Montebourg and his “new Socialists.”²⁴ He calls Germany the new “sick man of Europe” and suggests that, following the reunification of East and West Germany, France’s foremost ally has returned to “improbable dreams...of continental dominance.”²⁵ The admittedly dramatic leftist accused Berlin of setting “a trap of austerity that it has imposed all over Europe,” and stated that it was France’s responsibility to “heighten the tone” of Franco-German relations.²⁶ Moreover, a growing sentiment in the far left places the blame for its party’s gradual liberalization on meddlesome German influence. Shortly after the dismissal of Montebourg and his followers, an editor in *Le Figaro* asked whether Valls was not merely “the representative of a foreign party” and whether “those who openly doubt the economic policy of Berlin” have anywhere “left to hide.”²⁷

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Although what was said in *Le Figaro* is probably true on the inside of the official Socialist Party, it's not at all the case outside of it. Despite having been ejected in disgrace from the cabinet, Montebourg and his ultra-socialist doctrines possess enough support among French voters that he's already considered a prime contender for the Socialist nomination in 2017 and possibly the presidency itself. Moreover, Hollande's historically low 13 percent approval rating is the lowest rating of any president since the founding of the French Fifth Republic in 1958. This suggests that the centrist policies that Hollande has recently been pursuing are preferred less and less by left-leaning voters. Increasingly, more French voters, disillusioned by the apparent ineffectiveness of Hollande's realistic leftism, are moving to the political extremes.

Far more widespread, however, than further radicalization of the French left wing — already one of the most dogmatic in Europe — is an unprecedented shift to the right in voters' preference. Cornerstones of classic French Socialist policy, such as the obligatory 35-hour limit to the workweek, are becoming less popular, with 61 percent of the public saying the limit should be eased. Fifty-six percent even agreed that public spending should be cut.²⁸ Even more strikingly, a poll conducted by *Le Figaro* in early September 2014 showed that Marine le Pen was the favorite in every first-round presidential election for 2017, winning outright in the second round when pitted against Hollande.²⁹ Unfortunately for Hollande, what's recognized as a shift to the center by the left isn't as appreciated by those on the right. Jean-François Copé, leader of former president Nicolas

Sarkozy's center-right Union for a Popular Movement, decried Hollande in the wake of his change in policy trajectory in January 2014 as "ever François Hollande...vague, full of hot air and remnants of old Socialist doctrine."³⁰ Thus, even as Hollande's government moves to more centrist positions, elements of the right grow further and further from the center, while the center-right follows in growing less moderate.

What Hollande's domestic political woes mean for international relations and the European Union is primarily rooted in the increasingly common association of his policies with German economic intervention. In fact, much of Hollande's maneuvers are only made necessary because of Berlin's wide-reaching political-economic influence in the European Union. In exchange for Hollande's move to make it easier for France to borrow from the European Central Bank, for instance, Merkel wants considerably more direct influence in the French government's policies regarding taxation.³¹ Part of the reasoning behind Hollande's attempts to cut the government's annual deficits to three percent by 2017 is the hope that Germany will be more willing to relax EU regulations and give France access to a €6 billion earmark now sitting in EU coffers.³² Regardless

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The impact of Le Pen's present popularity and Montebourg's present challenge on Franco-German friendship are yet to be seen. It's possible, as has been the case several times in the history of the Fifth Republic, that French voters are giving their allegiance to the National Front only temporarily as a protest against the current Socialist government. Perhaps Montebourg and his followers will eventually submit to a more neoliberal version of their party. However, even if both of these individuals end up with little power themselves, it should be

remembered that Hollande's Socialist government is the least popular government in France since World War II. Friendship between the French and Germans isn't, as their mutual history has established, in any way natural: Anger toward Paris can only exist so long before it spreads to Berlin, if only through association. Whether or not it manages to escape its gloomy economic situation any time in the near future, France will grow further alienated from Germany before the end of the global financial crisis.

As absurd as it seems to suggest in 2015 that France and Germany might lose something of their friendship, it can't be forgotten that the current alliance is a historical anomaly with a relatively brief existence of little more than a half-century. As a result of the seemingly helpless government currently in Paris, extremism, especially on the right,

and neo-nationalism are beginning to see an increase in popularity in France. This, combined with the economic and political rise of Germany since its reunification in 1990, will be the cause of a gradual souring of Franco-German relations in the next several years. Growing French resentment of this German ascendancy will have an effect much like the refusal of the U.S. to join the League of Nations and the League's resulting failure to actualize any real influence on the international stage. Although the growing divide certainly won't be enough to fracture the EU, a lack of economic and political cooperation between France and Germany could very possibly make the EU a less relevant organization and damage European solidarity for the near future.

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