

 **Review ESSAY**

Michael Creswell. *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. pp.ix, 238. ISBN-13: 978-0-674-02297-3. ISBN-10: 0-674-02297-1. \$49.95.

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In 2003, the *Journal of Cold War Studies* published an essay by Michael Creswell and Marc Trachtenberg which argued that much of what we take for granted about postwar Franco-American relations is wrong. Rather than passive partners, the French, they insisted, had been active architects of the Cold War consensus, and even more surprisingly, German rearmament occurred because of, not despite, France. The piece was followed by a lively exchange, in which Charles Cogan supported this "revisionist" argument, while Mark Sheetz and William Hitchcock (author of *France Restored*, his own excellent attack on conventional wisdom) dissented.¹

Creswell and Trachtenberg responded in respectful, but strident, language--accusing Sheetz of being wedded to an outdated understanding of Cold War diplomacy and Hitchcock of not having followed through on the implications of his own research. Michael Creswell's *A Question of Balance* is a continuation of this argument, and the author revisits the negotiations of the early 1950s in meticulous detail in an attempt to make this "revisionist" thesis hold.²

Creswell's book, like Hitchcock's before it, rejects the traditional story, the one which sees France as reluctantly accepting an anti-Soviet policy and a rearmed Germany. France's hesitancy, that story goes, was based on a complex cocktail of fears and resentment--one part anti-Americanism, two parts fear of Germany, one part fear of Soviet retribution, one part colonial greed (or nostalgia) and two (or maybe three) parts sympathy with Communism. The postwar began, then, with France prepared to be a less than ideal ally. But during the 1950s the United States bribed and cajoled, and France ultimately followed.

¹ Michael Creswell and Marc Trachtenberg, "France and the German Question, 1945-1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 2003), pp. 5-28; Charles Cogan, "Response to Michael Creswell and Marc Trachtenberg" *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 2003), pp. 29-32; William I. Hitchcock, "Response to "France and the German Question, 1945-1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 2003), pp. 33-36; Mark Sheetz, "France and the German Question: Avant-garde or Rearguard? Comment on Creswell and Trachtenberg," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 2003), pp.37-45; and Michael Creswell and Marc Trachtenberg, "Rejoinder: New Light on an Old Issue," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 2003), pp. 46-53.

² I put "revisionist" in inverted commas here, because I'm not sure this difference of opinion on the motivation for a group of French elites is quite worthy of the term.

At least until the fall of Charles de Gaulle, this was done with mixed emotions. France was not so much a Cold War partner as a hapless ex-spouse, putting up with it all for the sake of the children. Told this way, the Cold War is a triumph of American interests over Euro-skittishness. Most surprising to an observer in 1947 would be today's Germany -- powerful, unified, deeply repentant, scornful of militarism and obsessively democratic. Whatever else might be said about American policy, the end of Communism and the rise of Europe are two tangible products of the world it set in motion.

Michael Creswell thinks this is a good thing too, but he's anxious for France's far-sighted leaders to get their share of credit. Like Hitchcock, he utterly rejects the notion of France as a passive partner, and strives to show how cagily French politicians and the Quai d'Orsay played their hand. Whereas Hitchcock argued that French leaders were engaged and subtle advocates of their own interest, Creswell extends this self-interest to include rearming Germany. On the face of it the argument could not be more counterintuitive--what **was** French interest in the 1950s if not anti-rearmament? -- but the author makes a decent case. As with other recent studies, Creswell sees French leaders of the Fourth Republic (Bidault, Monnet, Schuman) as hard-nosed realists, who, unlike large segments of the populace (in particular Communists and Gaullists) understood the situation. For this reason, he argues, they could never state publicly what was freely admitted in private; that they knew the Soviet threat was real and the German one imaginary. To the extent that French politicians did fear German rearmament, it was as a corollary to their fear of the USSR -- that is, the danger was really of a militarized Germany falling into Russian hands.

As the author makes clear in his conclusion, this story is important because it concerns not only German rearmament but also the triumph of "second-rate powers." France, despite her relative weakness, was a necessary element in the post-war compromise, and this forced the United States to do a number of things it would not have done willingly--such as to provide massive troop numbers on the European continent for decades. This may have appeared to be a victory for American hegemony, but Creswell reminds us that the United States was extremely unhappy with this situation, while France got pretty much what it wanted -- an assurance that both Germany and the Soviets will be kept in line, all at very little cost. (166)

Michael Creswell is surely correct that, given the complex circumstances, the French negotiated skillfully, but had they really accepted, at an early stage, German rearmament? He insists they had, as long as it was on their own terms. (35) To bolster this argument he produces some compelling sources. Typical is the statement by Georges Bidault from the 1940s referring to a German military threat as a "useful myth," (16) The author is also quite right to remind us that everything that occurred had as its background French elections, a constant in the seemingly unstable Fourth Republic, and that no French politicians could speak honestly about the subject of German rearmament.

Whatever one may think of his conclusions, Creswell is certainly not unambitious. For this brief book he has searched through more archives than many historians manage in a lifetime. Despite this, he avoids the clunkiness sometimes associated with archive-heavy writing. His writing, on the contrary, is witty and precise, and he does a number of things

very well, one of which is to artfully retell the story of the European Defense Community and the troubled years of these negotiations. This seemingly dry topic is nothing short of vivid in this account. He is convincing, most of all, in his argument that France was never led unwillingly by the United States, indeed it was just as often the Americans nervously watching for the French reaction. Still, given the book's hype ("a *tour de force*," "revisionism at its best") the evidence for his thesis remains surprisingly modest -- in fact, it is no stronger here than it was in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* article. Mark Sheetz's challenge (namely how does Creswell know when to believe his sources?) remains a valid one.

Creswell is relying on high-ranking politicians, men who inevitably tell different audiences different things. Since much of his thesis depends on the notion that the opposition to American policy was a bluff, Creswell thinks we can tell what these men truly believed, and to do this, he engages in a sort of inversion of conventional wisdom. Rather than disregarding diplomatic exchanges as, well, diplomatic, Creswell takes what is said in meetings between powerful men very seriously, and everything else is, by definition, of less significance. While this approach is novel, it is not entirely absurd--Winston Churchill was probably more honest with Roosevelt, or even Stalin, than he ever was with the British public -- yet it begs the larger question about motives. Will we ever know when a French politician had put politics to one side and was saying what he really felt? Why should Creswell (or any of us) privilege one type of source? When a diplomat is writing, or commenting, on events, he remains a diplomat. The whole debate seems to lead us into the dead-end of motive-mongering.

Worse, it sometimes places an unacceptable strain on the argument. For example, Creswell's thesis needs Georges Bidault as a reliable source, and for that reason he wants to rescue him from the demeaning characterization as a "rank nationalist" (16). But while Bidault may have been a contradictory man, he was not a complex one. Given his decision, only a few years later, to support the violent overthrow of the French government for its daring to consider Algerian independence, "rank nationalist" sounds about right.

Part of the burden of being an iconoclast is being held to a higher standard. Since Creswell cheerfully rejects convention we have to buy into his authority and confidence. Minor errors become major ones when so much is at stake. It is, therefore, disturbing that, without looking, I was struck by a few in this short book. For example, the Petersberg Conference and its hotel are consistently referred to as "Petersburg." (49, 51, 63, 65, 77-78) Trivial, but this is not an obscure reference. More serious was seeing Saul Friedländer described as a "German journalist" and one of Konrad Adenauer's "favorite commentators." (154) Saul Friedländer, of course, is not a German journalist but an Israeli historian. Surely Creswell meant Ernst Friedländer, a German journalist of brief notoriety, but hardly well-known. Any European historian would recognize the name Saul Friedländer and wonder what he was doing in Adenauer's Germany, yet it was apparently missed not only by Harvard's editors, but by the author's mentor John Mearsheimer (who, given his well-publicized preoccupations, might be advised to know the difference between an Israeli and a German). If archival one-upmanship and precision are the game here, an error like this is a problem.

Although I am left wondering just a bit about the errors I probably missed, the book is, in the end, a success. The book does not linger too long on its weaknesses -- almost as if Creswell is too good a historian to waste his time on a hard-to-establish premise. As for bold revisionism, it promises more than it delivers, but that fact is to the book's advantage. We are left with a sophisticated, highly readable, and only somewhat unconventional story of the complex negotiations surrounding the EDC. A difficult subject for any writer, Creswell breezes us through with confidence and sophistication, the figures come to life and the debates feel vital. It is to the author's credit that we need not accept his thesis to be very impressed with his account.

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