

 **Review ESSAY**

R. Gerald Hughes. *Britain, Germany and the Cold War: The Search for a European Détente, 1949-1967.* Cold War History Series, vol. 17. London: Routledge, 2007. xv + 253 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. £70.00 (hardcover), ISBN-10: 0415412072; ISBN-13: 978-0415412070.

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A Perfunctory Search?

Judging from the constant flow of high quality monographs on the subject, Cold War Studies are alive and well. In this instance, R. Gerald Hughes from the Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, reexamines the most pressing question of British foreign policy after the Second World War – not so much the “German Question” per se as the incidence of Anglo-German relations on the determination of policy towards the Soviet Union. Ever the “junior partner” in the Special Relationship, Britain was further constrained by American initiatives or refusals to budge – the extreme case being the wrecking of the Paris Summit on which Macmillan had staked so much by American bungling of the U-2 spy plane affair. On many occasions, Hughes explains the failures of British leaders to make progress towards détente by the self-delusion that they were still sitting at the “top table”, and he does not fail to quote Henry Kissinger’s cruel words in his 1979 memoirs: “British statesmen were content to act as honored consultants to our deliberations” (p. 159).

There is of course nothing new in this. The interest of the book lies elsewhere, in the considerable detail into which it goes to recount Anglo-German relations from the foundation of the Federal Republic to Willy Brandt’s first openings towards a “new Eastern Policy”. It is clear that the author has “dug up” or re-opened all the relevant files in the British National Archives, Kew, complemented by those of the Chancellor Adenauer House Foundation, Rhöndorf, and some from the U.S. National Archives, Washington, as well as the relevant Presidential papers. Thus we have an almost day-to-day account of the tug-of-war between the inflexible Chancellor (who was in office for most of the period, until 15 October 1963) and his various British opposite numbers, with their mutual distrust reaching a climax of personal detestation during Harold Macmillan’s term of office. The reasons for the distrust are well known: fear of another “Rapallo” on the British side, suspicion that Britain was always ready for a sell-out to the Soviets with the Germans footing the bill — concretely meaning a formal recognition of the de facto partition of Germany and the loss of the German territories in the East. Hughes

documents extremely well how the British governments were caught in their own contradictions, mostly born of the Cold War, of course, but not only.

Thus something apparently evident, like the non-validity of the Munich Agreements — which the British authorities had officially denounced as null and void in 1942 — was made the object of a bargaining lever by Adenauer, to the great indignation of the Czechoslovak government. That this goes far beyond mere Cold War quarrels, as we could now see them, is demonstrated by the recurring disputes until the end of the period under consideration on the question of the Oder-Neisse line, the German-Polish frontier imposed by the three victors at Potsdam. Admittedly, the Cold War element was a major factor — how else could one explain why Britain seemed to renege on its 1945 consent? Also, the British authorities made it clear to the Poles by a secret undertaking given in 1962 that they continued to adhere to the decisions arrived at in 1945 on the Oder-Neisse line. But, as Hughes indicates, it was not only the Communist government of Poland which pressed for an official recognition of the new frontier: the anti-Soviet Polish “Government-in-exile” of General Anders, which could usually be relied upon to denounce all the policies followed by the Communist government, sent unequivocal calls in the same direction to Macmillan and Kennedy in February 1962.

The relevance of the book for an understanding of today’s continuing (if somewhat subdued) disputes cannot be over-emphasized. It is clear that beyond the surface of “Capitalist” versus “Communist” struggles, there were enormous *longue durée* forces at work, as can be seen today in the resurgence of the claims for damages on the part of German expellees from Czechoslovakia or Poland, with the concurrent indignation and refusal to listen to these claims emanating from today’s non- (very often rabidly anti-) Communist Czech and Polish authorities.

Considering his reputation in some circles as the arch-Cold Warrior (and after all he started it all openly at Fulton), one is struck by Churchill’s “low profile” in the complex power game played by the three victors vis-à-vis the vanquished Germany: Stalin, Truman, and Eisenhower appear to have occupied the foreground while Churchill’s pursuit of the elusive summit which the Americans and Soviets did not want made him neglect direct dialogue with “Dr Adenauer”, as the Western press often chose to call him. Of the two elder statesmen, it is clear that Adenauer was then the more perseverant and better negotiator. Hughes has superb passages on Adenauer’s unbending defense of what appeared to most objective observers the indefensible positions of the Federal Government, beginning with the so-called Hallstein Doctrine, whereby the Federal Republic effectively arrogated to itself the monopoly of the incarnation of eternal Germany, to the exclusion of the “Soviet-occupied zone”, as Adenauer and his friends continued to call the German Democratic Republic.

One cannot fail to admire Adenauer’s nerve — much like de Gaulle in 1940-1945, he masterfully played the very poor cards which had been dealt to Germany after the disaster of 1945, turning the tables on his British victors and thwarting all their initiatives, with

the “economic miracle” adding insult to injury at a time when the old staple export industries were crumbling in Britain. That these two proud (many in Anglo-American circles would say arrogant), uncompromising Nationalists should have forgotten their “inherited” enmity and buried the hatchet in the name of national survival within a European Community whose potential importance British leaders of the caliber of Churchill and Eden did not remotely realize shows their extraordinary grasp of the post-war realities of international politics. And explaining Macmillan’s dislike of anything German by his experience of trench warfare during the First World War, as Hughes largely does, precisely shows the difference in statesmanship with de Gaulle, who also had bitter personal memories of the First World War (let alone the second). One is led to the conclusion that national leaders like Adenauer and de Gaulle on the one hand, and Macmillan and Wilson on the other, simply “did not play in the same league”, to use the common expression which springs to mind. And the Federal Chancellor’s vision did not stop at “reconciliation” with France. Hughes cites a superbly percipient pronouncement by Adenauer in 1953: “the Soviet Union will be interested in a German settlement only when the Soviet Union believes that it is in her own best interests to have such a settlement. That would be if the integration of Western Europe had so developed that the Soviet Union was forced to abandon all hope of ever dominating Europe” (p. 43).

After reading the book, one is left with the impression that the “search” alluded to in the sub-title was probably not an assiduous one — or at least that British statesmen always knew or felt that the solution of the “German question” was beyond their power. Hence their efforts to circumvent the problem, with Churchill and his three circles, Eden at Suez, Macmillan in Bermuda and Wilson’s foredoomed application for membership of the EEC (European Economic Community). Adenauer may or may not have been right in his prediction that the solution would come of itself, when the Soviets had abandoned “all hope of ever dominating Europe” — it can be supposed for instance that Reaganites would say “all hope of ever dominating the world” and claim credit for having definitively demonstrated that this was a vain hope. But the British memos and notes for internal consumption which Hughes has found during his research never seem to come near to what we now know was the final key. It is a great pity that the various rules governing access to government records do not enable us to have a sequel to Hughes’s fascinating book, ending with the documents covering German unification: for the time being we can only rely on memoirs and other published material, unlike the “internal” papers which, as that monograph amply confirms, often differ significantly from the “diplomatically correct” public pronouncements.

It is to be deplored that the publishers should have opted for very inconvenient end notes in a scholarly monograph of this nature — a policy which can (perhaps) only be justified in the case of books intended for the general public. One is always fumbling for the details in the unwieldy (fifty-eight-page) section of notes when footnotes would have provided immediate enlightenment and hassle-free reading comfort. The copious, twenty-seven page bibliography will be found useful, though students might be somewhat confused because the section on secondary sources comprises publications

which should now be perceived as primary sources on the period (if not on the subject), like Adam Rapacki's 1963 article in *International Affairs*, "The Polish Plan for a Nuclear-Free Zone Today" — an article which must by the way make interesting reading in 2007 in the light of Poland's eagerness to host American anti-missile weaponry. An added bonus is that some graphs and tables are provided, the most revealing being on p. 140 — the West German answers from 1951 to 1969 to the question "Do you believe we should reconcile ourselves to the present Polish frontier — the Oder-Neisse line — or not?" With 80 percent answering No in 1951 (59 percent in 1964, but 34 percent in 1967) it is clear that "the wily Adenauer" as Hughes names him (p. 147) knew that he had massive electoral backing when he resisted British calls for compromise.

There is no doubt therefore that *Britain, Germany and the Cold War: The Search for a European Détente, 1949-1967* provides a welcome addition to the existing historiography of the subject — sizeable though it might already be.

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