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Aurélie Élisabeth Gfeller, *Building a European Identity: France, the United States, and the Oil Shock, 1973-74*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. x + 252 pp. Acronyms and abbreviations, introduction, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 US. (cl). ISBN 978-0-85745-225-2.

Review by Michael H. Creswell, Florida State University.

“This presidency [of the European Union] has taught me much over the past six months,” Nicolas Sarkozy proclaimed in 2008. “When you have the chance to learn about, and decide on, issues from twenty-seven member states, you understand that Europe is probably the most beautiful idea ever conceived during the twentieth century, and that we need Europe more than ever.” But quickly shifting gears, Sarkozy cautioned that attempting to build Europe against the will of “nations” would be “a historical mistake” (p. 1).

Thus begins *Building a European Identity: France, the United States, and the Oil Shock, 1973-74*. The book’s author, Aurélie Élisabeth Gfeller, a 2008 doctoral graduate of Princeton University, contends that Sarkozy’s words capture France’s longstanding ambivalence toward the European project. This claim might surprise some readers, who would note that France was one of the strongest initial supporters of the European project. Indeed, a number of early efforts at European integration, like the European Coal and Steel Community and the abortive European Defense Community, originated in Paris. Moreover, several observers would note that France has enjoyed the many benefits provided by Europe. France thus has many reasons to see its involvement in European integration as a net positive.

While Gfeller readily concedes these points, she argues that as the European Community (EC) and the European Union (EU) matured, its member states granted them increasing authority. By definition, this increase in power for Europe was balanced by a decrease in power among the member states. This evolution caused a rethinking of the role of the state and produced disquiet among the French political elite, who feared a loss of state sovereignty. It is this unease that, according to Gfeller, accounts for France’s political elites’ ambivalence toward Europe.

Gfeller traces these long-term worries among French elites who wanted to protect the nation-state back to the presidency of Charles de Gaulle (8 January 1959-28 April 1969). De Gaulle, who emphasized French *grandeur* and independence, imposed strict limits on progress toward integration. This strategy changed with the advent of Georges Pompidou’s presidency (20 June 1969-2 April 1974). Pompidou accelerated the integration process with his trinity of “completion, deepening, and enlargement.” This triad led to the addition of three states to the community and the granting of greater power to the European Parliament (pp. 1-2).

The biggest and most important change occurred, however, during the oil shock of 1973-1974, when Pompidou set out to establish “Europe” as a major actor in its dealings with the United States and the Arab world. Pompidou also added a political language to replace the cultural one in defining European identity. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing continued this change in European identity. During his presidency (27 May 1974-21 May 1981), Giscard championed reforms designed to strengthen the EC’s structure along intergovernmental and supranational lines.

For the author, these changes raise a number of questions, including: “How did these moves come about? Which short- and long-term geopolitical, economic, and cultural factors made them possible?” Her answer “points to broad political and economic forces, contingency, and change of political leadership.” She believes that “this unprecedented emphasis on common European action on the global stage, combined with Giscard’s willingness to embrace supranational reforms, marked a new recognition of the need for a political Europe” (p. 2).

The changes in the international geopolitical and economic environment included the seeming decline of American power in the early 1970s, which enabled the European countries to step up on the global stage. While this decline was relative, it forced the United States to reassess its own global commitments.

A second factor was the arrival of East-West détente. De Gaulle returned to power in 1959, and he sought to reassert French power and to lessen Europe’s economic and military dependence on the United States. By the time he left office in 1969, relations between France and the Soviet Union had improved markedly. As the security threat posed by the Soviet Union waned, France had less reason to rely on the rest of Europe for its defense.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, Willy Brandt and his top foreign policy aide, Egon Bahr, promoted a reduction of tension with the East. Brandt’s ascension to the chancellorship in 1969 allowed him to institute his Ostpolitik. Relations with the United States also began to cool, in part due to President Lyndon Johnson’s belief that German reunification was no longer a U.S. priority and Brandt’s doubts about the United States’ commitments to Europe in general and Germany in particular.^[1] These doubts continued when Richard Nixon took office in 1969. Nixon’s national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, harbored doubts about Ostpolitik, fearing that it would give the Soviet Union greater leverage in dealing with Germany. Better relations with the East, he thought, would come at the cost of loosening ties with the West (pp. 5-6).

Ostpolitik also caused concern in France. Despite the fact that Pompidou had achieved most of his objectives concerning Berlin, he, too, feared that Ostpolitik might lead the Federal Republic to drift away from the West and into the Soviet orbit, where it would become Finlandized.” At worst, it might lead to some sort of Soviet alliance with a nuclear-armed and reunified Germany (p. 6).

French officials’ worries about the potential repercussions of Ostpolitik also affected French policy toward the East, toward Western Europe, and toward the United States. During Pompidou’s presidency, Paris and Moscow had many meetings, but France took a more cautious approach instead of following de Gaulle’s more ambitious plans for a Europe that would stretch from the Atlantic to the Urals. France’s worries would therefore have to be paired with stronger relations with Western Europe and the United States. All three steps would be needed to “ensure security against the Soviet threat while keeping German ambitions in check” (p. 6).

The Soviet threat had long been the glue that cemented U.S.-European relations, but détente proved to be a solvent. As relations between Western Europe and the Soviet Union improved and tensions relaxed, there was less need to rely on the United States, which has been the ultimate guarantor of the former’s security. Seeking greater independence from the United States, the Western European states looked to deepen their relations with each other. Ironically, these moves coincided with a fear among some European states, especially France, that improved U.S.-Soviet relations could lead the superpowers to create some sort of condominium at Europe’s expense (p. 7).

Economic changes also created divisions. In an effort to fix stubborn balance of payments deficits, in 1973, the Nixon administration went off the gold standard, ending the dollar’s convertibility into gold

and thereby ending the Bretton Woods system. The United States sought to institute a new system in which the European countries, primarily Germany, would make the necessary adjustments to make the system work.[2] By the early 1970s, the Europeans created a joint currency float known as the “Snake, Europe’s first attempt at monetary cooperation. Designed to maintain stable exchange rates by preventing fluctuations of more than 2.25 percent, the system was eventually replaced (p. 7).[3]

Trade was another area of concern. During the three decades following the Second World War, Western Europe enjoyed strong economic growth. This growth helped cause a trade imbalance with the United States, in which the latter was on the short end. American concerns over the trade imbalance and related concerns about the U.S. gold supply fueled Washington’s resentment of the EC’s Common Agricultural Policy.[4] The expectation of EC enlargement therefore reduced Washington’s backing for European integration. While the United States was able to obtain \$45 million in compensation after filing a claim under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, Europe, negotiating as a single bloc, also used this same institutional framework to reach its own objectives, especially over agriculture (p. 7).

The rise of the Third World also played a large role in this evolution. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) increased the price of petrol four-fold in 1973-1974, catching the Western industrial nations off guard. The resulting belt-tightening measures highlighted their dependence on cheap imported oil and signaled an end to the *Trente Glorieuses*, a period that had seen a steep rise in France’s productivity, innovation, and standard of living. Western Europe then saw clearly that its relations with the Third World were no longer a one-way street and that it could no longer dictate terms (p. 8).

The Third World’s newfound influence prompted some European officials to reflect over the nature of Europe’s unequal relations with the United States. While most European countries welcomed the American guarantee of their security, they began to chafe over what they viewed as their inferior status in their relations with the United States. This was especially the case for France, which had long expressed concerns about its dependence on the United States. Besides, the ability of the OPEC countries to use oil as an effective tool of leverage helped align the views of both Europe’s pro-Arab and pro-Israel countries. Together, these and other factors led the European states to seek greater autonomy from the United States (p. 9).[5]

This shift in attitude by Europe dovetailed with the views of Gaullist France, which, as noted above, had taken several steps to gain greater independence from the United States. What is novel is that France’s political elite was able to embrace two identities simultaneously: strong supporters of a European political identity that would exert its influence on the international stage instead of the French state and a continuing belief in French national identity. Gfeller contends that France’s political elite continue to hold this dual identity even today (p. 10).

The book demonstrates a number of strengths. Gfeller contributes to our understanding of “The Year of Europe” and the 1973 War, which scholars have largely chronicled though an Anglo-American lens, by adding the French perspective.[6] Concerned about deterioration in transatlantic relations, the Nixon administration launched “The Year of Europe,” which was intended to update and renew the NATO alliance, resulting in a new Atlantic Charter. While the EPC wanted to respond positively to the American proposal, France remained “ambivalent” (p. 20). French officials feared that the United States was using the pretext of détente in attempt to reassert leadership in Europe. They also feared that improved relations between Moscow and Washington could lead to a U.S.-Soviet condominium. She also adds to the relatively few studies on French policy toward the Middle East. Her scholarly study on France complements the more numerous studies of transatlantic relations during the 1970s that are focused on Britain, Germany, and the United States.

Nonetheless, the author makes a few minor mistakes along the way. For example, when writing about the Nixon years, she contends that “[i]n an era when neorealist thinking still held sway in U.S. policy circles, however, U.S. political actors and commentators focused more on absolute power than on the country’s relative position in the international system” (p. 3). This is not entirely the case. Rather, classical realists, like Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, helped guide U.S. foreign policy during this period.[7]

The author also contends that “The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 prompted tough U.S. measures—including the severing of diplomatic ties with Moscow, the withdrawal of SALT II, and a grain embargo” (p. 199). In fact, the United States and the USSR maintained diplomatic relations despite the Kremlin’s extreme displeasure at the U.S.-led boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games held in Moscow. Both sides retained ambassadors in their respective capitals.[8]

The book is heavy on detail, which slows down the narrative considerably. At times Gfeller takes the reader through multiple drafts of a document and the back and forth of diplomatic exchanges, often in painstaking detail. Yet this continued tilling of the same ground bears little additional fruit. When coupled with small print, the book’s 203 pages of text seem like a lot more than that.

These points aside, *Building a European Identity* has much to recommend it. Scholars of French and European integration history should welcome this text, as the author draws on a wealth of primary sources from France, Switzerland, and the United States. This primary source base is supplemented by secondary sources in English, French, German, and Italian. The book is in some respects an international history, but this wide source base is used to illuminate the policies of a single nation. While advanced graduate students should be able to grasp its arguments, the high price (\$75.00 US) would seem to restrict its adoption in the classroom.

NOTES

[1] John F. Kennedy expressed similar views. In a pre-election interview, Kennedy remarked that “the U.S. pledge for reunification should neither guide nor deter U.S.-Soviet relations.” He added, “German unification, which represents the long-range goal, is certainly not in the cards for many years.” See Alexandra M. Friedrich, “Awakenings: The Vietnam War’s Impact on West German-American Relations during the Johnson-Erhard Era, 1963–1966,” paper presented at St. Johns University, March 24, 1999, p. 5.

[2] Other reasons for this currency turmoil include devaluation of the French franc and the upward revaluation of the German mark. For more on the rise of the Deutsche Mark, see William Glenn Gray, “Number One in Europe”: The Startling Emergence of the Deutsche Mark, 1968-1969,” *Central European History*, 39/1(2006): 56-78. For the most recent scholarly study of U.S. policy toward the balance of payments system, see Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[3] The Snake came to an end in 1979 and was replaced with the European Monetary System.

[4] See Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power*.

[5] The Alliance was under great pressure during the 1960s. For an assessment of how the United States dealt with these strains in the Alliance, see Thomas A. Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[6] In 1973, President Richard Nixon announced that it would be “The Year of Europe,” and his assistant for national security affairs, Henry Kissinger, called for a new Atlantic Charter. These pronouncements from Washington were received skeptically in Europe’s capitals, where they were interpreted as American efforts to reestablish dominance over Europe. It was French Foreign Minister Michel Jobert, who, in Kissinger’s eyes, was the biggest opponent of his initiative.

[7] For a historical discussion of realist thought, see Michael J. Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). For a discussion of Scowcroft’s views, see David F. Schmitz, *Brent Scowcroft: Internationalism and Post-Vietnam War American Foreign Policy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011).

[8] For a comprehensive view of the Olympic boycott, see Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Michael H. Creswell
Florida State University
mcreswell@fsu.edu

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