Victors, Vanquished and the German Problem 1945 to 1990

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William R. Smyser, *From Yalta to Berlin. The Cold War Struggle over Germany*. Foreword by Paul H. Nitze (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 465 pp., $39.95. SBN 0-312-06605-8.

Hanns Jürgen Küsters, *Der Integrationsfriede. Viermächteverhandlungen über die Friedensregelung mit Deutschland 1945–1990*. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2000), 1,026 pp., €64.80, ISBN 3-486-56500-1.

Readers of these two books are reminded that the 'short' 20th century was not only an American, but also, for worse rather than for better, a German century – a century overshadowed by the German problem – the inability to assign an enduring place for the German nation-state in a peaceful and co-operative security system in the heart of Europe. Two violent German attempts to force a German world power on unwilling European neighbours led to disaster, and the victors' efforts to solve the German problem after 1945 to a Cold War – a conflict that focused largely on the German problem and, at times, bordered dangerously on another global military conflagration. Even seen from today's perspective it remains something of a miracle in international relations that the seemingly elusive quest for a solution of the German problem finally and peacefully reached its goal by bringing about the settlement of 1990. Partly on the basis of material that has become available as a result of the big turning-point ('Wende') of 1989/91 both Smyser's and Küster's books attempt to retrace the circuitous road taken by the international discussion of the German problem – a road that began with Nazi Germany's surrender and ended with the integration of a united German nation state in a new European peace order.

William Smyser, like Paul Nitze, belongs to an American species that unfortunately seems to be threatened by extinction: the 'old hands' who devoted their lives to dealing with German affairs. After having spent two years in Nazi Germany, Smyser served, from 1945 well into the 1960s, as an area specialist both with the US Army and the State Department. His experience as a part-time 'player' lends a personal colour to his text, marred only by his somewhat simplified views on German history. It would be grossly unfair, however, to assess his book on this basis. What counts is his highly readable synthesis of the international and intra-German contest over Germany's future place in Europe after 1945. To be sure, a compre-

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hensive account like this must largely rely on secondary literature – in this case at times somewhat dated, but sufficient to document the various and often controversial positions held by Western and Soviet governments on the conduct of the Cold War over Germany. Smyser adds a new dimension to his book by perusing recent findings from Soviet archives, published by the Cold War History Project, in order to depict the intramural debates that flared up between the Soviet decision-makers nearly as often as between their Western opposite numbers.

In starting his story Smyser starts off on the wrong track by repeating the legend of a division of Germany and Europe that allegedly took place at Yalta. It is true that the ultimate division of Germany resulted from the zonal partition of the country agreed on at the Yalta Conference in early February 1945, but this result did not reflect the motives of the Big Three, all of whom at that point had all-European designs in their minds. The author then covers the four-power contest over occupation policies and a German peace treaty up to the 1948–9 Berlin airlift and the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949. In line with recent scholarship he argues that the isolation to which the Soviet zone of occupation was relegated could not have been in Stalin's interest, as he aimed at a Soviet role in all of Germany, but that it was due to his overzealous East German proconsuls such as Walter Ulbricht.[1] The next historical phases to which the author turns are the German–American clash over the second Berlin crisis and the ensuing Ostpolitik, which, in his words, led to a most 'intensive period of German–American diplomatic coordination' (p. 260). He cannot claim the same for the period of roughly fifteen years preceding unification, when he views the German problem largely in the context of the nuclear arms race (the double track decision) and the definite East–West détente under the auspices of the INF Treaty of 1987. To the author these developments paved the way for Gorbachev's 'reversal of alliances' – his growing reliance on West Germany instead of the decrepit East Germany. A thorough examination of the international and German negotiations which brought about Germany's unification with particular emphasis on America's instrumental part in them concludes the author's long narrative.

There are commendable strengths to Smyser's book: it maintains an even balance in presenting both the Western and the Soviet aspects of his subject; he unravels the intricacies of the Berlin problem, to which he rightly assigns prominence, he disentangles the complexities of the negotiations accompanying Brandt's Ostpolitik as well as the complicated course of events that preceded the opening of the Wall. His account presents some high drama in depicting confrontations and turning-points in East–West relations, which occurred in Berlin and elsewhere – for example in Berlin in October 1961 when American and Soviet tanks faced each other at Checkpoint Charlie in the centre of the city, and again on 9 November 1989, before the Wall was overrun.

The author's penchant for dramatising the story he relates recommends his book

[1] Smyser, however, finds no evidence proving that Stalin, in his famous notes of early 1952, seriously intended German unity outside the Soviet empire (pp. 113ff.).

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to the general reader, especially outside Germany, where events around the German problem are not so well known. The scholar may be more inclined to criticise this author's predilection as a temptation to distort historical reality, which, at times at least, was somewhat less exciting. As an example, one may mention US President Kennedy's reactions to the second Berlin crisis beginning in 1958: Smyser seems to overstate his case in claiming that Kennedy, in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis, underwent a dramatic change of heart from an appeaser to a hardliner in reacting to the Berlin crisis, while in fact Kennedy appears to have remained more consistent throughout the Berlin crisis (pp. 180 ff.).

As an additional weakness one may cite the author's tendency to depict something as a historical fact for which the evidence is not altogether conclusive. Two examples may illustrate this.

First, on the basis of Soviet tactics the author takes it for granted that the Wall would not have been built if the Western allies had immediatelly intervened against it (p. 161). Second, Smyser assigns Honnecker a major role in forcing Brandt out of office by tolerating the espionage activities conducted by Günter Guillaume which led to Brandt's resignation (p. 268). Both interpretations seem more doubtful than the author claims.There is also one major gap in the author's presentation, in that he fails to deal with the Helsinki CSCE negotiations and their by no means negligible bearing on Germany's future.

Finally, there are some minor and a few major factual errors. Contrary to what he claims (p. 38), the territories east of the Oder-Neisse line had not altogether been abandoned by the German population fleeing before the Red Army; German experts were admitted to Western contingency planning before the building of the Wall and not afterwards (p. 151). It is questionable, too, whether Gorbachev, in dealing with the bankrupt GDR, saw 'no alternative to Kohl' as early as November 1989 (p. 334).[2]

In spite of such inaccuracies this captivating account is authentic in recording the political atmosphere and the major actors' spirits, as displayed both in the West and the East during the conflict unfolding as to the future place of Germany in Europe. In this respect, it reads like an original source itself.

It is rewarding to compare Smyser's work with the other book to be considered here. Its author, Hans Jürgen Küsters, is a political scientist (although a historically oriented one) rather than historian per se. As a consequence and unlike Symser he lets the description of conditions and the political analysis dominate over the presentation of changing events or colourful action. Far too young to have been a witness to the subject of his inquiry, Küsters has made a name for himself as the chief director of the extensive serial publication 'Dokumente zur Deutschland-politik' and as the editor of a weighty documentary collection dealing with the

[2] Other corrections are called for regarding the Soviet general Sokolovsky's withdrawal from the Allied Control Council, which took place in March 1948 and not at the beginning of the blockade, as the author thinks (p. 81). Contrary to what the author states, the Western European Union was not made part of NATO in 1954, but remained an independent organisation (p. 128), nor was the KPD as such ever readmitted to German politics, but rather a successor party named DKP (p. 261).

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international diplomatic exchange that preceded Germany's reunification.[3] With these scholarly credentials he approaches his topic as a researcher highly familiar with the vast literature as well as the documentary and archival records of the Western powers and the two German states (to a lesser degree of the East). With its bibliography alone comprising some 90 pages this 'Habilitationsschrift' is thus a daunting paragon of erudition.

The scope of his massive study is closely related to the course of events that accompanied its composition. While his study was originally planned to be an investigation into the work of the Inter-Allied Conferences on Germany held between 1945 and 1959, the events of 1989–90 made it seem imperative to the author to include into his narrative an account of the ultimately successful attempt at uniting Germany, and there is no doubt that his assessment of what happened between 1945 and 1959 has been further clarified through the perspective that the events that occurred some forty years afterwards permitted, and vice versa. A special merit of this book is that it opens its major sections by giving a detailed description of the various networks of the responsible decision-makers and the workings of the bureaucracies at all levels of the respective governments.

The final conclusion at which Küsters arrives with regard to the major part of his study is sobering: During all the years between 1945 and 1959, he states, there was no realistic chance of the success of negotiations aiming at the unification of Germany. The primary factor responsible for this lack of success was what he calls a 'policy of postponement' to which all four Allied governments adhered well into the postwar period, as they were poorly prepared for peace negotiations and haunted by the deterring example of the ill-prepared Versailles peace settlement. Having, in addition, no real interest in recreating a German nation-state soon they also wanted to keep their future options open. Although the Yalta Conference had installed a machinery for inter-Allied consultation through periodic meetings of the Allied foreign ministers, the author, taking stock of these conferences one by one, perceives no serious intention on the part of any of the four victors to work out a peace treaty for a united Germany. Differing from other authors, he delivers this verdict even with regard to the Moscow Foreign Ministers' Conference in March 1947, by pointing out that Great Britain banked on a failure which would expedite the merger of the British with the American zone in Germany.

The conferences on Germany that followed in the decade between 1949 and 1959 were, in his view, equally devoid of serious proposals for an East–West agreement on Germany's unification including a peace treaty. They were held partly to fend off the pressure the Soviet Union exercised in the Berlin question (in 1949 and 1959) and to minimise the risk of a war, while the Soviet government initiated them, in order to thwart Western plans to integrate the Federal Republic economically and militarily into the Western alliance and to prepare the ground for international recognition of the GDR. In all cases, the author stresses, these

[3] Hanns Jürgen Küsters and Daniel Hofmann, eds., *Deutsche Einheit. Sonderedition aus den Akten des Bundeskanzleramtes 1989/90*, Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik, (Munich: Oldenbourg 1998).

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conferences were convened with an eye on public opinion, especially in Germany and in France, where strong neutralist currents existed.[4] As Küsters sees it, this was, aside from a desire to demonstrate the victors' rights vis-à-vis Germany, the primary reason why both the East and the West again and again agreed to meet at the conference table without expecting any palpable results. As he puts it: 'The Four Powers pursued a policy that was superficial and without substance – as policy hypnotised by the emotions of the public and hankering for domestic applause for foreign policy exploits' (p. 717). Both the Soviet Union and the Western powers thus strove to impress on their constituencies (in the case of the USSR they included the western European communist parties) the impossibility of the victors coming to terms with regard to the German problem. In doing so the two sides assiduously attempted to exploit the negotiations for the purpose of shifting the onus of their failures to the opposite side – thereby discrediting the advocates of a compromise between East and West on the one hand, and enhancing the loyalty of all those who banked on or had resigned themselves to a long-term division of Germany and the European continent on the other.

To be sure, Küsters identifies some turning-points in the somewhat monotonous history of these conferences. He mentions for example, the little-known American decision of early 1946 not to withdraw its troops from Europe in the immediate future but to commit the United States to maintaining European security against Germany by means of a pact that guaranteed Germany's permanent demilitarisation.[5] He also calls our attention to the Soviet suggestion thrown out as early as the Paris conference of July 1946 to honour the political preferences of the East German population (p. 282) and to the internal consensus reached by the Western allies in mid-1952 to regard not the Germany of 1937, but the Germany resulting from the Potsdam conference (i.e. cut off from the areas east of the Oder and Neisse) as the sole basis for a unified Germany (p. 612). He finally points to the Western allies' announcement of September 1952 as envisaging negotiations rather than as a dictate for the future German peace settlement (p. 618) and to the decision taken by the Soviet Union before the Geneva summit of 1955 to deal with the German problem solely on the basis of the existence of two German states.

In line with his general assessment Küsters refuses to regard the famous 'Stalin Notes' of the spring of 1952 as a turning-point on the road to German unification. In his view Stalin had not the slightest intention of actually opening serious negotiations aiming at a united neutral Germany which would be permitted to have a military force of its own. The sole purpose he sees behind Stalin's initiative was to

[4] Special consideration of France as a crucial factor for dealing with Germany was, as Küsters repeatedly stresses, a continuous concern of the United States and Great Britain. One little-known example he mentions was the decision to speed up the preparations for a West German Republic in December 1947, because the two Anglo-Saxon powers wanted to anticipate de Gaulle's political comeback in France by creating a *fait accompli*, fearing, as they did, that under de Gaulle France could not be won over for a new German state (p. 374).

[5] Contrary to what the author claims (p. 272), in 1919 Wilson did not reject a long-term American security commitment in Europe, as he proved by agreeing to a trilateral agreement guaranteeing the demilitarisation of the Rhineland.

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torpedo the signing of the treaties establishing a European Defence Community and granting sovereignty to the Bonn Republic. In part, he finds this judgement corroborated in the revelations he found in recent autobiographical accounts by former Soviet diplomatic functionaries such as Falin.

In view of the fact that the whole series of Allied conferences on Germany led nowhere, Küsters asks why the Western allies, the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic succeeded in 1990 where they had failed earlier. In his book's long final chapter, which presents a concise and perspicacious survey of the negotiations leading to Germany's unification, Küsters offers a number of reasons: the definite abandonment of the previous policy of postponement by the two major actors, the United States and the Soviet Union (the latter acting under the impact of a reformist ideology and an economic crisis) – both overruling the hesitant London, Paris and Warsaw governments; the Kohl government's unswerving committment to a Western-oriented policy which made sure that American troops would continue to be stationed in Europe even though the Red Army withdrew into the Soviet Union; and, last but not least, the studious efforts on the part of the Bush administration deviating from American behaviour during the 1950s, to find face-saving devices for Gorbachev, who was no longer viewed as an enemy but as new ally of the West, designed to make it possible for him to accept the dismantling of the Soviet empire in Europe without risking his support at home.

Undoubtedly, Küsters's study is the definitive treatment of its subject. It raises two problems nonetheless: first, it is too long, and, in parts at least, is too much given to details to attract the non-specialist reader. For the general reader, who is assisted by the book's excellent index rather than by the somewhat vague subtitles, this is a book that, for all its qualities, is rather to be skimmed through and consulted than to be read *in extenso*. To overcome this difficulty, some drastic cuts would have been helpful. For example, the author devotes much too much space, to the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in London in September 1945, although it was only indirectly related to Germany. Second, this book, for all its thoroughness and although it contains a fine survey of the available literature, does not take account of scholarly controversies. This omission is particularly to be regretted with regard to the passages that deal with Stalin's hotly debated notes of the spring of 1952.[6] Owing to this *lacuna* even the expert reader is at times at a loss in trying to make out at what point the author's analysis diverges from previous interpretations.

One may say in conclusion that, to an extent, these two books complement one another. There is no doubt that both authors, Küsters undoubtedly more than Smyser, have contributed significantly to widening our knowledge and deepening our understanding of a decisive, maybe *the* decisive, issue in mid-twentieth century world politics.

[6] Owing to his disregard of previous scholarly discussion the author fell victim to an inaccuracy in stating (p. 603) that after the receipt of the Soviet note of 9 April 1952, Adenauer accepted the American suggestion of low-level soundings with the Soviet Union, which actually was not the case (cf. Rolf Steininger, *Eine Chance zur Wiedervereinigung. die Stalin-Note vom 10. März 1952* (Bonn: Neue Gesellschaft, 1986), 63).

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