

Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand: leaders in reconciliation

Helmut Kohl 1930 - 2017

François Mitterrand 1916 - 1996



It was perhaps unlikely that two of Europe's greatest leaders of the second half of the 20th century should work so closely together. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterrand were born and grew up in an era when their nations fought two cataclysmic wars.

Kohl and Mitterrand worked hard to bolster the post-war relationship between France and Germany, and underscored the importance of peace between their nations in the pursuit of European integration. The sight of the two leaders holding hands at a ceremony on 22 September 1984 to mark the 70th anniversary of the start of the First World War is an iconic and moving image that made international headlines.

Helmut Kohl

Born in Ludwigshafen, Germany in 1930, Helmut Kohl reached his mid-teens as the Second World War ended, and he often said that he had been spared the worst of the war due to his young age. He studied law in Frankfurt before switching to history and political science at Heidelberg University.

He began his working life in academia, later moving into business and eventually politics. In 1959 he was elected leader of his hometown's branch of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, and rose quickly through the ranks of local and regional politics. After serving as minister-president of Rhineland Palatinate (making him the youngest elected head of government in Germany), and as chairman of the CDU, he took the first steps toward the Chancellorship of West Germany.

In 1982, the ruling government fell to a vote of no confidence instigated by the CDU. Kohl was consequently elected Chancellor by the Bundestag (German parliament), and a year later, he consolidated his hold on power by overwhelmingly winning the 1983 federal elections.

Kohl is perhaps best remembered for his commitment to a single German state. He was the first Chancellor to receive the head of state of East Germany in a diplomatic capacity, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall he was steadfast in pursuing the reunification of East and West Germany. A treaty was signed and ratified by both parliaments in 1990, reunifying Germany 45 years after conflict had split the country in two, and bringing Kohl's vision of a united Europe closer to reality.

François Mitterrand

François Mitterrand was born in Charente, France in 1916. He studied Public Law and received his degree in 1937, and established his political roots on the French nationalist right.

On the outbreak of the Second World War He was drafted to the front lines, and was captured in 1940 and held as a German prisoner-of-war. After his escape, he worked for a time under France's Vichy regime before pivoting to the left and committing to the French resistance. He built up a network with other prisoners-of-war and French armed resistance groups before escaping to London to avoid arrest by the regime.

Mitterrand met Charles de Gaulle, considered the figurehead of the resistance in exile, in an attempt to cooperate on the French resistance, though they did not see eye-to-eye.

After the war, Mitterrand cemented his position on the left by opposing Charles de Gaulle, eventually becoming leader of France's Socialist Party. Following a failed first attempt at running for the Presidency, he was elected President in 1981, leading the country's first left-wing government in 23 years.

Committed to a unified Europe

Helmut Kohl was the second of only three people to have received an Honorary Citizenship of Europe from the European Council, in recognition of his extraordinary work on European integration and cooperation, such was his contribution to the European project.



Mitterrand and Kohl in 1987

While President, Mitterrand supported European enlargement by encouraging Spain and Portugal's accession to the EU. He also believed in a more integrated EU and championed the passing of the Single European Act in 1986, which laid the first legal foundations for a European single market. Together, Kohl and Mitterrand completed this goal with the passing of the Maastricht Treaty six years later, making their dream of a seamless transnational market a reality.

The famous photograph of Kohl and Mitterrand near Verdun, the site of one of the longest battles of the First World War, was taken on 22 September 1984, in a remembrance ceremony which showed how far France, Germany, and Europe had come since the two World Wars.

Holding hands in front of a memorial wreath at the Douaumont ossuary, Kohl and Mitterrand helped make Verdun not just a painful memory, but also a symbol of peace and reconciliation, demonstrating to Europe and the world the importance and power of peace on the continent.

They developed a close friendship as well as a fruitful working relationship over the years, and famously joked with each other. Kohl once presented Mitterrand with a typical German dish of Saumagen (sow's stomach), and reportedly told him to 'eat up, or you're getting the Saarland back'.

In recognition of their life's work on Franco-German relations, they jointly received the Charlemagne prize in 1988, which is awarded for work towards European unification. In his acceptance speech, Kohl emphasised the things that France and Germany had in common, and that acted as a basis for the entire EU project, starting with the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. Several of their peers, including Konrad Adenauer and Simone Veil, have also won this prize.

Kohl was Chancellor for 16 years, the longest-serving in the 20th century. Mitterrand served as President of the French Republic for 14 years, the longest presidency in France's history.

Later years

Having privately battled with prostate cancer for several years, François Mitterrand succumbed less than a year after his departure from office, in January 1996. His friend Helmut Kohl died of natural causes in June 2017. A European 'act of state' in his honour, the very first of its kind, was held at the European Parliament in Strasbourg one month later. Here, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker paid tribute: *'Helmut Kohl was a German and a European patriot, because for him there was no contradiction between the two. For him, German and European unity went together'*.