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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **William R. Keylor**, Boston University

“Punching Above His Weight”

When Charles de Gaulle returned to political power in France in 1958, first as Prime Minister and then as President of the newly established Fifth Republic, his country had suffered a series of military, political, and colonial traumas in the last eighteen years that seemed to have toppled it from the ranks of the great powers in the world: the humiliating military defeat of 1940; the German occupation over the next four years amid the Vichy regime’s shameful collaboration with its occupiers; the costly, exhausting, and eventually unsuccessful military campaign in Indochina from 1946 to 1954 to cling to the remnants of an empire whose time had come; the embarrassing fiasco of the 1956 joint military intervention with Great Britain and Israel in Egypt that managed to antagonize its American ally, the Soviet Union, and the emerging members of the non-aligned bloc; and, worst of all, the bloody campaign to preserve the power and privileges of the European settler minority in the overseas department of Algeria that led the country to the brink of civil war.

In the course of the following eleven years when de Gaulle held the reins of power in Paris, he succeeded in reversing the country’s ignominious slide and reviving its claim to great-power status. There is a long list of historical works evaluating this bold quest for the restoration of grandeur in Gaullist France. What they all share in common is a tendency to tell the story primarily from the vantage point of France.¹ The volume under review focuses

¹ Maurice Vaisse, *La grandeur: La politique étrangère du général de Gaulle, 1958-1959* (Paris: Fayard, 1998); Philip H. Gordon, *A Certain Idea of France: French Security Policy and the Gaullist Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Frédérique Bozo, *Deux stratégies pour l’Europe: De Gaulle, les Etats-Unis et l’alliance atlantique, 1958-1959* (Paris: Plon, 1996); Constantine A. Pagedas, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations and the French Problem, 1960-1963: A Troubled Partnership* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Paul Legoll, *Charles de*

instead on the responses of the rest of the world to the French president's often provocative words and deeds on the world stage. The book's approach to the topic is geographical: The lucid introduction by Mark Kramer, the editor of the series in which this volume appears, is followed by individual chapters dealing with the reaction to de Gaulle's policies on the part of great and lesser powers as well as intergovernmental organizations such as NATO and the European Economic Community. The result is a comprehensive assessment, based on the latest scholarship as well as research in the relevant foreign ministry archives, of the ways in which policymakers on the receiving end of French foreign policies during this period responded to the challenges that they posed. Limitations of space prompt me to restrict my review to the reactions of those most directly affected by the Gaullist initiatives in foreign policy: the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, and NATO.²

Carolyn Davidson's chapter on the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations' response to the French president's challenge to Washington's dominant position in Europe demonstrates the extraordinary degree to which the audacious initiatives mounted by the much weaker ally and protégé across the Atlantic caught the occupants of the White House and their State Department off guard, resulting in a cautious response to de Gaulle's disruptive policies. The Eisenhower administration's reaction to the newly-installed French leader's secret memorandum of September 1958 proposing a tripartite 'inner directorate' of NATO (the U.S., Great Britain, and France) was timid and vacillating. Unwilling to take on de Gaulle directly, Eisenhower and Dulles resorted to stalling tactics in the hopes that the proposal would generate sufficient opposition from the smaller powers in the alliance to kill it. Washington's strategy proved successful, as Anna Locher and Christian Nuenlist demonstrate in their chapter on the other NATO members' reaction to France's bid for privileged status alongside the 'Anglo-Saxons.' The Alliance's energetic Secretary-General, Belgium's Paul-Henri Spaak, took the lead in preventing "the impending split of NATO into a two-class alliance" (p.87) with a successful stealth campaign that derailed the French proposal within a few years.

Frustrated in his bid for membership in an exclusive club to manage the Atlantic alliance, de Gaulle brought his country into the exclusive nuclear club in 1960 with a successful atomic bomb test in the Algerian Sahara—which was still part of France. His subsequent sponsorship of a French nuclear strike force with targeting schedules completely independent of NATO frustrated the plans of Kennedy and his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to affirm centralized control of the alliance's nuclear deterrent. Davidson notes that while Kennedy bitterly resented de Gaulle's successful effort to torpedo his 'Grand Design' for a Western Europe closely tied to the United States, Lyndon Johnson was far more flexible in his treatment of the obstreperous French leader. De Gaulle's provocative moves in

Gaulle et Konrad Adenauer : La cordiale entente (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2004) ; Erin R. Mahan, *Kennedy, de Gaulle, and Western Europe* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) ;

² The book also includes illuminating chapters on the perspectives on de Gaulle's foreign policies in the Soviet Union, China, Israel, Africa, and Latin America.

March 1966—the withdrawal of French forces from NATO’s integrated military command, the eviction of U.S. soldiers stationed in France, and the demand that NATO headquarters be removed from the Paris region—were met with equanimity in Washington. Relying on the findings of Thomas Schwartz, Davidson credits Johnson with recognizing the democratic spirit and voluntary nature of the alliance.³

In sharp contrast to this calm response from Washington, as James Ellison notes in his chapter on the British reaction to de Gaulle’s policies toward NATO and the European Economic Community, at this time the French president “was seen by British governments as more of an enemy than an ally” (p. 135). The main stumbling block in Anglo-French relations during de Gaulle’s tenure was the French president’s obsession with excluding Britain from the European Economic Community so that the non-Communist half of the Continent could be managed by France, with West Germany as its junior partner. De Gaulle’s two vetoes of Britain’s application for entry (1963 and 1967) prompted understandable ire in London. But, as Ellison shows, this *contretemps* concealed two points on which France and Britain were in agreement. Both countries opposed the supranationalist implications of the Treaty of Rome, preferring an intergovernmental decision-making process reflected in de Gaulle’s allusion to *L’Europe des Patries*. Both were also, for obvious historical reasons, horrified at the thought of a nuclear-armed West Germany. London and Paris jointly opposed the Kennedy administration’s proposal for a Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF), because it would elevate West Germany to their level in the alliance and devalue their own small nuclear forces. But the two French vetoes, accompanied by de Gaulle’s harsh rhetoric about Britain serving as the American Trojan horse on the continent, prompted London to intensify its transatlantic ties in such a way as to burnish its reputation as the preeminent European defender of Atlanticism.

Carine Germond’s chapter on Franco-German relations in the de Gaulle era highlights the extraordinary degree to which these longtime enemies patched up their historic quarrels to forge the most important bilateral relationship in Western Europe. As de Gaulle candidly put it in a message to West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, “Europe is the combined affair of the French and Germans together....Alone we don’t have the means to lead Europe, but together we can” (cited on p. 43). But, as Germond demonstrates, the celebrated Paris-Bonn axis established by the Elysée Treaty of January 22, 1963, failed to transform the Federal Republic into the junior partner in a French-led ‘European Europe.’ The preamble to the treaty forced on Adenauer by the Bundestag, which reaffirmed Bonn’s firm commitment to NATO, set the stage for the loosening of that country’s privileged ties to its neighbor across the Rhine that reached its conclusion after the replacement of Adenauer by the staunch Atlanticist Ludwig Erhard before the end of the year. The West Germans resented in

³ Thomas Schwartz, “The de Gaulle Challenge: The Johnson Administration and the NATO Crisis of 1966-1967,” in Helga Haftendorn, Georges-Henri Soutou and Stephen F. Szabo, eds., *The Strategic Triangle: France, Germany, and the United States in the Shaping of the New Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp.127-148.

particular de Gaulle's demand that the EEC adopt the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which accorded lavish financial benefits to French farmers at the expense of German taxpayers, as a condition for France's active participation in the Common Market. The *Ostpolitik* launched by West German Foreign Minister Willy Brandt in 1967 was initially seen as the fulfillment of de Gaulle's urgent call for 'détente, entente, and cooperation' with Eastern Europe as a means of ending the division of the Continent into two armed camps beholden to their respective superpowers. But it soon became evident that Bonn rather than Paris had become the Communist bloc's 'privileged interlocutor' in the West, shunting de Gaulle and his search for détente to the sidelines toward the end of his career.

Although the volume under review focuses on the *international* perspectives on Gaullist foreign policy, co-editor Garret Martin is concerned with discerning if there was a Gaullist Grand Strategy, or whether the general's diplomatic initiatives simply represented a parochial ploy to reestablish France's power and prestige in the world. Martin credits de Gaulle with a much broader objective of replacing the bipolar international system of the Cold War with a multipolar world order in which medium-sized powers such as France could play an influential role in shaping the global environment while maintaining their independence from superpowers or supranational institutions. He was realistic enough to recognize that France itself could not achieve such a revolution in world affairs by itself but would have to cooperate with its neighbors on the Continent to emancipate Western Europe from American hegemony. The alternative, he feared, was a Europe "dissolved in an Atlantic, that is to say American, whole like sugar in coffee" (cited on p. 297). Since an independent Western Europe out from under American domination would no longer pose a threat to the Communist bloc, the Soviet Union could relax its control of Eastern Europe. A united, independent Europe, led by France of course, could return to grandeur after so many years of division, weakness, and vulnerability.

The student-worker uprising of May 1968 in France, followed by a severe financial crisis, exposed the weakness of de Gaulle's claim to European leadership. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in the summer strengthened the cohesion of NATO and reduced the prospects of European détente, on which his entire foreign policy was built. After carefully assessing the plusses and minuses of de Gaulle's foreign-policy initiatives across the globe from the narrow standpoint of French national interest, Martin submits a final assessment that gives credit where credit is due: "[T]he General left power with France in a far more stable position than when he took office. On the world stage, his spectacular style of headline-grabbing initiatives contributed to making sure France's voice was heard, even if this often meant irritating and angering allies" (p. 291).

William R. Keylor is Professor of History and International Relations and Director of the International History Institute at Boston University. He is the author of numerous articles and book chapters on the history of French-American relations as well as *The Twentieth Century World and Beyond: An International History since 1900* (Sixth edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and *A World of Nations: The*

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International Order Since 1945 (Second edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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