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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Jonathan Fenby. *The General: Charles de Gaulle and the France He Saved***. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012. ISBN: 9781616086008 (hardcover, \$32.95).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Irwin Wall**, University of California, Riverside (Emeritus), and New York University

Jonathan Fenby has written an interesting but frustrating book. He is a journalist and writer, not a historian, but he has written frequently about France where he was once bureau chief for *The Economist* and *Reuters*. His appealing biography of de Gaulle is written in lucid, elegant, and entertaining prose. His interpretive judgments, if not original, are sound, avoid all the deification common in French biographies, and to me have the ring of truth, or, let us say, accuracy. There are many studies of de Gaulle in English but few recent biographies. There are two fine, relatively recent biographies of de Gaulle in French, that of Jean Lacouture and most recently Eric Roussel.¹ Lacouture's book is available in a shorter edition in English, while Roussel still awaits translation. Fenby has mined both books with profit. An appealing feature of his work is that it abounds with delicious quotations and details, although some of them would seem to be of questionable provenance: in particular authors like Jean Raymond Tournoux and Alain Peyrefitte, whom Fenby relies on, have had their veracity questioned.² Fenby also manages to humanize de Gaulle, who, at six foot three inches, even to his contemporaries seemed to loom larger than life.

Yet the book contains errors which are particularly annoying to the trained historian. Léon Jouhaux, who spearheaded the anti-communist split in the French trade unions during the Cold War, is identified as a Communist trade union leader. In the election campaign of December 1955 the Communists are said to have shaken off the denunciation of Joseph Stalin by Nikita Khrushchev when it had not yet happened; Khrushchev's Secret Speech was leaked

¹ Eric Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle* (Paris : Gallimard, 2002) ; Jean Lacouture, *Charles de Gaulle* (New York ; Norton, 1990-92).

² Jean Raymond Tournoux, *Tragédie du général* (Paris : Plon, 1964) ; Alain Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle* (Paris : Fayard, 1994).

to *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* in February 1956. The French Communists are said to have become “Eurocommunist” in 1967 when Eurocommunism as an idea was first invented in the mid-1970s. Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France did not support the idea of a European army in June-July 1954 as Fenby says; he first tried to vitiate it and when that failed, let it go down to defeat. Where Fenby is not wrong he is often confusing, particularly in his account of elections; for example in the Gaullist victory of November 1958 the *Rassemblement populaire Français* [Rally of the French People] (RPF) received 158 seats in the National Assembly but had a two-thirds majority on the basis of 37.5 % of the vote. This makes no sense without an explanation of the two-round electoral system which was then used and is still in use today in French politics, as opposed to proportional representation that was in effect during the Fourth Republic. François Mitterrand and René Bousquet were not known to have been Vichy collaborators (Mitterrand through 1943), until this information was revealed in Pierre Pèan’s biography of Mitterrand in the 1990s.³ And so on.

The errors are a distraction to the informed reader but do not prevent an appreciation of the work’s broader lines of interpretation. Fenby calls de Gaulle a “republican monarch,” (1) and he has not constructed an oxymoron, but rather attempts to show that de Gaulle, despite his authoritarian tendencies, recognized that in the twentieth century, sovereignty came from the people, and not by divine right. Hence the crowning achievement of de Gaulle’s career was to see France governed by a powerful French president elected by universal suffrage. He was the first French president so elected, even though the experience turned out to leave a bitter taste in his mouth when he failed to get a majority on the first ballot in 1965 and was forced into a runoff against Mitterrand. Within de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic, however, which Mitterrand sarcastically referred to as a ‘*coup d’état permanent*’⁴ (before using its institutions in a similar way himself during his own presidency), de Gaulle did in fact govern in an authoritarian manner. His cabinet meetings, by all accounts, were not discussions, but rather series of ministerial reports, the various discussants being treated like school children being graded by their disciplinarian teacher. De Gaulle exercised authority naturally, the fruit of a military career, to be sure, but also spurred by a deep sense that he incarnated, in some sense, the nation he aspired to serve and rule. He seems to have come by this belief at an early age, believing himself to have been ‘chosen,’ destined to be the savior of his nation, and he exercised power naturally, as if it in fact belonged to him by divine right. Hence his penchant for referenda, which he wrote into the constitution of the Fifth Republic, that created, in effect, a kind of plebiscitary democracy. De Gaulle asked the French to approve him personally when he submitted his referenda to them, always with the implication that if refused a popular vote of confidence he would resign; this was exactly how he made his final exit in 1969. De Gaulle’s idea that he could personify his nation was akin to the fascism of his era, except that he scorned political parties, including those that acted in his name. He saw himself as arbiter and not fuehrer.

³ Pierre Pèan, *Une Jeunesse Française: François Mitterrand, 1934-1947* ((Paris: Plon, 1994).

⁴ François Mitterrand *Le Coup d’Etat permanent* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1964, reissued in 2010).

De Gaulle was a military intellectual after becoming a combat-hardened veteran of the First World War, writing books on leadership and military tactics.⁵ In the latter book he advocated the use of tanks in armored divisions, angering a static French military leadership that took from the First World War a new dogma of stress on the defensive, which was enshrined in the impregnable fortifications of the Maginot Line (the Germans of course never attacked the Maginot line in 1940, but used their tanks to go around it). He did not, however, conceive of the use of tanks in conjunction with air power. Across the Rhine, German General Guderian read him with avidity and interest, taking his recommendations to heart. If he was out of favor with the French military, however, he caught the attention of a far-sighted politician, Paul Reynaud, who brought him into his short-lived government as military advisor in 1940. It was from that perch that he managed to make his childhood fantasy about being the personification of his nation into a reality.

For the key incidents in de Gaulle's life, the creation of the Free French in 1940, his return to power as Head of State in May 1958, and his disappearance and return during the crisis of May 1968, Fenby resorts to detailed chronological and diary-like accounts. These day-by-day summaries are skillful and add excitement to the events they describe, increasing the book's readability. The story of 1940 is magical, almost mystical. Only a man as obsessed as de Gaulle was with the sense of personal mission could have challenged the convention of his colleagues and superiors that the war was lost. It is striking that no figure or claimant to governmental authority in 1940 except de Gaulle, nor any of the generals who were his superiors, saw fit to make the claim that France had lost a battle but not the war, or understood (and this he shared with Churchill) that one day the new world would step in to save the old. That he happened to be in London, where Churchill, desperate to maintain a fighting France on the side of the British Empire, turned over to him the BBC for that legendary address on June 18, 1940, allowed him to make his indelible imprint on history. Fenby writes with the conviction that great historical figures, individuals, do influence the course of history. De Gaulle's act, in 1940, would seem to constitute proof. As if to prove, too, that he was a brother under the skin to Churchill, words were his weapon: "la flamme de la résistance française ne doit pas s'éteindre et ne s'éteindra pas,"⁶ he told his countrymen, and though few actually heard him at the time, the words were nevertheless potent. And from that spark, indeed, the flame of the Free French and the French Resistance grew to become the postwar government of France with de Gaulle at its head.

Fenby writes eloquently of the obstacles along the way, not the least of them President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who first made his peace with Vichy, then Admiral Darlan, then supported General Giraud, and accepted de Gaulle only under protest after FDR's plan for an American occupation of France came to naught. This was in part due to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who assured de Gaulle early that he would work only with de Gaulle once American troops had landed. But it was in the main due to de Gaulle's stubbornness, along

⁵ Charles de Gaulle, *Le Fil de l'épée*, (Paris : Berger-Levrault, 1959) ; *Vers l'armée de métier* (Paris: Plon, 1971).

⁶ "The flame of the French Resistance must not and will not be extinguished."

with his words, his other powerful weapon. De Gaulle made a virtue of his nation's weakness. Again and again he exasperated Churchill, who warned repeatedly that in the end Britain would go with America. But neither Churchill nor FDR could overcome the deep strain in the French psyche that de Gaulle had touched. The internal Resistance rallied behind the Free French in London to become the provisional government of France that installed itself in Algiers until France was liberated in the summer of 1944—under Charles de Gaulle.

De Gaulle resigned in 1946 because he could not prevent the return of the parties, the 'factions' without which modern democracy has yet to discover a way to govern. The authoritarian Republic he proposed to his countrymen smelled to him too much like the regimes in Europe that had just been defeated. In exile he adumbrated a philosophy that was in its own way akin to fascism and he founded a movement that had the fascist allure. This was sufficiently so that the Fourth Republic felt equally challenged by its Right, the Gaullist RPF, and by its Left, the PCF, *Parti communiste français* (French Communist Party), and it constructed a Third Force and manipulated the electoral system in 1951 to see that the Third Force emerged as a majority. The Republican coalition achieved that majority narrowly as it turned out: the Gaullists and Communists together received 48% of the vote. However, the RPF's 20 % actually represented a sharp decline as compared to its strength in the municipal and cantonal elections of 1948 and 1949. Its Deputies, moreover, proved amenable to the blandishments of power, to the disgust of de Gaulle, and they entered the Fourth Republic's governing coalitions, alienating de Gaulle, who seemed consigned to a permanent exile in Colombey, his family home, until he returned to power when the Fourth Republic collapsed during the Algerian war. Fenby shows, however, that far from incarnating the democratic forces of his nation in 1958, this time de Gaulle came to power on the heels of a threatened putsch. Rebellious generals in Algeria, at the head of an insurrection by the settler population there, threatened to install de Gaulle in power by means of landing paratroops in Paris if the National Assembly did not do so legally.

If Fenby admits that the Fifth Republic was, so to speak, born in 'original sin,' he nevertheless gives credit to de Gaulle for averting a civil war. Here I have to disagree. At its best this is counter-factual history; we will never know what would have happened had de Gaulle refused to step into the maelstrom in 1958. But the French economy was growing at the time, the country was devoted to Republican values, and the communists were ready to fight in the streets to defend the Republic too. Nor had a consensus yet developed against the Algerian war. The generals managed to frighten those in power by extending their sway to unruly Corsica but there is no indication they could have pulled off a putsch in Paris. The government, moreover, had not adopted a real policy of peace or negotiations in Algeria, and legal power was still vested in General Raoul Salan, who as head of the so-called Committee of Public Safety in Algiers enjoyed as much legitimacy as did de Gaulle. De Gaulle had his agents on the scene in Algiers who manipulated the Committee and the crowd to call for his return, while in Paris he began the process of forming a government even before Premier Pierre Pflimlin had resigned. It is easy to conceive of a scenario in which the Algiers rebellion subsided once the government in Paris seemed safely in the hands of a politician who would pledge to carry on as before. And that is precisely what, at the outset of his government, de Gaulle did.

Fenby argues that de Gaulle had no clear conception when he set out of what he would do or even what was possible in Algeria. De Gaulle, like most clever politicians, had let almost everyone who saw him believe that he agreed with them, telling the Right that Algeria was French forever and the Left that he foresaw its independence (although not for a long time). His program when he came to power was to reform the French state by giving it a powerful executive with himself exercising that power. He believed that alone to be the key to keeping Algeria for France. I agree with Fenby that de Gaulle rejected integration of the Muslims into France pure and simple as being impossible, and he equally rejected independence, which he thought would lead to chaos followed by totalitarian communism. Yet the Fifth Republic integrated the Muslims immediately as French citizens, allowing them to vote in the referendum that installed the new regime in November 1958. De Gaulle did vainly pursue the search for or creation of a moderate Muslim majority that would accept French rule tempered by a measure of autonomy. I have argued further that the Challe plan, that militarily brought the war to the rebels, and the Constantine plan, that aimed at industrializing and modernizing Algeria, should both be taken as indications of his firm intent to keep Algeria French, or as he once put it, as French as possible.⁷ Only by 1960, with the election of John F Kennedy, whom De Gaulle knew to be much more critical and unsupportive of the war than his predecessor, did he seriously contemplate peace through negotiations.

To my mind, further, Fenby misses the extent to which de Gaulle miscalculated what he could achieve through negotiations, as a consequence prolonging them a year beyond what was necessary, and thus giving the OAS and the settlers the chance to organize their campaign of terror. That in turn had the result of making any compromise on their fate impossible, and once Algeria became independent they fled to France, leaving their wealth and life-blood behind them. France also abandoned, that is to say de Gaulle abandoned, the so-called *harkis*, Muslims who had fought for the French in the belief that the French were in Algeria to stay and intended to turn Algeria into a Franco-Muslim successful enterprise. When they too tried to enter France following the March 1962 Evian agreements, de Gaulle blocked them on purely racist grounds, giving the lie to the previous French claim of the universality of French citizenship and the ideal of assimilation on which the empire had been based. Of course by that time the empire was gone as well. Algeria, one must recall, was not regarded as a colony but as part of metropolitan France. Only when it was gone was its loss explained away as part of the inevitable process of decolonization. De Gaulle left Algeria in the worst and most chaotic way possible, the only defense of which was that this was also the only way, an argument that Fenby appears to accept but that I have always found absurd. I also think that by today's standards, forcing more than the one million Muslims into concentration camps in an effort to pursue a war that the former French Prime Minister Guy Mollet once branded as "imbecilic," constitutes a war crime.⁸

⁷ Irwin Wall, *France, The United States, and the Algerian War, 1954-1962* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁸ Mollet's phrase was "une guerre imbecile et sans issue." See Denis Lefebvre, *Guy Mollet, le mal aimé* (Paris: Plon, 1992).

I agree with Fenby, and congratulate him, on his honest appreciation of the limitations of what de Gaulle achieved with his foreign policy of 'independence,' his withdrawal from NATO, and his policy of détente with the USSR. If anything, Fenby underestimates what de Gaulle did achieve, for in retrospect he was one of the first to conceive of an end to the Cold War, transcending the status quo. It turned out that it was the West German Chancellor Willie Brandt, a decade later, who was able to make European détente, as opposed to an American détente with Moscow, meaningful through the policy of Ostpolitik. Fenby also properly points out the limitations of de Gaulle's stewardship of the rapid growth and expansion of the French economy in the 1960s, the fruits of which were not shared with the working class. De Gaulle's pursuit of atomic weapons also diverted funds to the military that might have been devoted to university expansion, at a time when the student population was rapidly exploding. De Gaulle had little understanding of economics, absurdly demanding an international return to the gold standard in the 1960s. But just as he had chosen inflation over the policy of rigor advocated by Mendès France in 1945, he now made the opposite mistake, doggedly holding to a policy of monetary stability in the 1960s and imposing an unnecessary austerity on the working class. In his mind a strong franc and a strong France amounted necessarily to the same thing. His narrow economic policies were paralleled by foreign policy excesses: abandoning Israel in the 1967 Six-Day war, which, perhaps because of his balanced policy prior to the war, he had been uniquely able to prevent, and he followed that by an irritated outburst against Jews in general ("sure of themselves, and domineering"), which, by the way, as Fenby shows, had been characteristic of him before (554). As bad as his shameless interference in the internal affairs of Canada, using a trip to Canada to declare "Vive le Québec libre" on the balcony of the Hôtel de Ville in Québec city. France under de Gaulle had not-too-subtly been encouraging Quebec separatism for some time, to the general irritation of Ottawa, leading some in his own government to wonder whether he was slipping into what at the time was universally thought to be senility. While France had much to gain by its shift to a pro-Arab policy in 1967, it had nothing to gain by provoking instability in Canada, which was otherwise the most pro-French of nations.

May 1968 brought it all crashing down, the economy and the foreign policy, forcing de Gaulle to turn to Germany and Washington for help before he was forced to resign. The 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia made a shambles of his foreign policy three months after his humbling by the students, who had managed to bring the economy to a halt in May while workers rallied to their cause. De Gaulle cleverly managed to achieve, theatrically, an election victory in June 1968, after staging a kind of disappearance and sudden return, and worker-student excesses in turn appeared to frighten the middle class back into his arms. His party returned to power in the June 1968 elections. But he was 78 years old and a defeated, embittered, man who was troubled by poor eyesight and growing pessimism. He vainly tried still another resurrection by proposing a referendum once again in 1969, this one on the issue of 'participation,' by means of which he meant to give some kind of satisfaction to the May 1968 movement, which many at the time interpreted to be about shared bureaucratic power in universities and factories as much as about higher wages and smaller class size. But again he mixed up the issues with his person, identifying himself still with France in the abstract, and warning that if defeated, he would resign, with chaos to follow. Defeat in the referendum showed that France was indeed tired of him, if paradoxically assured of stability by his institutional changes. The transition to the presidency of Georges Pompidou was untroubled.

De Gaulle lived long enough to complete still a new volume of memoirs before passing away the following year.

Reading Fenby is as pleasant as it is useful, and stimulates one to think more deeply about Charles de Gaulle. But in the end I find myself falling back upon the judgment of Pierre Mendès France in his obituary on de Gaulle in *Le Monde*, November 12, 1970: Mendès France recognized that at a given moment, in June 1940, de Gaulle was truly the incarnation of France. But in May 1958 he came to power by means of a putsch, “by means of ruse and duplicity; on the decolonization question his conceptions were without imagination; in Algeria he was incapable of imposing his solution, to the extent that he had one, and his twists and turns in retrospect led to the worst of solutions. His foreign policy was one of pride and nostalgia that led the country to international isolation.” Fenby does not go that far, but he does de Gaulle justice in a fine biography.

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