

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



William I. Hitchcock. *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944-1954.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. 291 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4747-3.

Reviewed by Sean Kennedy (University of New Brunswick)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2001)

On 31 August 1954, the French parliament voted down the treaty establishing the controversial European Defense Community (EDC), which would have created a supra-national West European army. The French Fourth Republic's allies, particularly the United States, were anxious to re-arm the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and bolster West European security, and were thus furious at this outcome. This was especially the case since it had been the French themselves who had proposed the idea in 1950, at a time when the outbreak of the Korean War had given especial impetus to the desire to arm the West Germans. Fourth Republic politicians had initially hoped that the EDC would contain a revival of German power, the very notion of which still disturbed them nearly ten years after the war had ended. But after what seemed to be interminable stalling, they had evidently changed their minds. To many foreign observers, this was at best evidence of a crippling indecisiveness on the part of the French political class, at worst destructive petulance.

Not so, William Hitchcock tells us in his carefully researched study of French foreign policy in the decade following the Liberation. He argues that the statesmen of the Fourth Republic were able to craft a reasonably coherent and frequently effective national strategy. This was the case despite the fact that the country's problems were legion. Domestically, the challenge of postwar economic reconstruction was compounded by a legacy of internal political divisions, which soon resurfaced. By 1947 France's large Communist party was an opposition force rather than part of the governing coalition. General de Gaulle, who had resigned as head of the provisional government in 1946, had then challenged the very existence of the nascent Fourth Republic for a time with his new

political movement, the Rassemblement du Peuple Français. The often beleaguered centrist coalition of parties which was left to govern had its own internal tensions. And after elections in 1951, the party system was characterized by ongoing fragmentation.

Nevertheless, in the midst of this turmoil a general strategy for national renewal was devised. Although previous attempts to forge a consensus on the need for state intervention to ensure a coordinated economic recovery had failed, in 1946 Jean Monnet, an experienced administrator with vision, and an ability to get along with American officials, secured the creation of the Commissariat General du Plan. This agency, insulated from the vagaries of day-to-day politics, was charged with developing a comprehensive scheme for revamping France's economy. In Hitchcock's view, the Monnet Plan represented the beginning of a "planning consensus", which emphasized pragmatism and the need for international economic cooperation, and sidestepped ideological disputes and coercion. Such a framework would be adopted in policies regarding Europe, too, as the French "worked to shift the terms of debate away from the traditional language of Franco-German conflict and toward more palatable concepts of rational planning and integration of economies." (39)

But it took a while for the Fourth Republic's statesmen to come around to this, and in the interim there was a good deal of frustration. Postwar France, to put it mildly, was in an unenviable diplomatic position. The country was not included in the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, and was viewed with a mixture of pity and contempt by many officials of the Big Three. The French did, however, obtain a zone of occupation in Germany, and

sat on the Allied Control Commission. Their strategy, initiated under de Gaulle but continued for some time thereafter by Georges Bidault of the Mouvement Republicain Populaire, was to ensure that a German state could never again threaten them. The French sought to detach the Rhineland and Ruhr, integrate the Saar into their own economy, permanently limit Germany's industrial capacity, and ensure the use of its resources for Western European reconstruction. Such a strategy brought the Fourth Republic into prolonged disputes with its "Anglo-Saxon" allies, as growing concern about Soviet power convinced the latter that (West) Germany would have to be revived-carefully.

It was not only France's allies that questioned Paris's hard-line strategy. On the domestic front, politicians such as Andre Philip and Leon Blum (premier for a short time in 1946-47) from the Socialist party, and officials such as Monnet and Rene Massigli, the ambassador to Britain, also advocated a more conciliatory stance. By 1948, these various pressures, in conjunction with events such as the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia—which undermined the notion that it was Germany, and not the USSR, which was the leading threat to Europe—led to a fundamental change in tactics. Not in goals, though; the French remained determined to contain German power.

This would now be done by emphasizing the need for Franco-German cooperation, allowing Bonn to take its place among the Western European states, but "in a controlled, politically balanced, and economically liberal environment" (p. 100). Hitchcock shows, however, that this re-orientation of French policy did not proceed smoothly. There was a dispute with the British and Americans over reevaluating the Occupation Statute for Germany, and there was further wrangling over the Saar. On the other hand, their new approach promised the French a leading role in European economic reconstruction, and was embraced by their American ally. The Fourth Republic's efforts to seize the initiative on the German question culminated in the call for the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community in May 1950. Inspired by Monnet, but advanced with vigor by the new foreign minister, Robert Schuman, the plan provided economic security in terms of providing for continued French access to German coal. Even more importantly, it also mollified the West Germans by making them partners in an international endeavor, and reiterated to the Anglo-Americans that the Fourth Republic was interested in constructive solutions.

These achievements were soon imperiled by the Korean War, intensifying concerns about Soviet aggression, and the subsequent debate over West German rearmament. Between 1950 and 1952, French politicians adopted a defense policy broadly analogous to that which had led to the Schuman Plan, reflecting a continued belief in the "planning consensus" framework. Confronted with demands from their allies to allow the FRG to contribute to Western European defense, they initially sought to shape the agenda and contain West Germany within a multinational military structure. Yet in the following two years, as we have seen, plans for what became known as the European Defense Community were undone.

This was not because, as some contemporary American officials contended, the French were "wayward, unreflecting [and] illogical."¹ As Hitchcock points out, the country was deeply divided over the EDC, and the changed composition of parliament after the 1951 elections made the situation even more difficult. Thereafter, French threats of non-ratification, used partly as leverage in bargaining for more American funds for their own rearmament, angered Washington. The British, for their part, urged approval of the EDC but did not want to get too involved in it. And there were problems with West Germany. The French perceived the FRG as becoming increasingly arrogant, and feared it would use the *imbroglia* to present itself to the Americans as being a more reliable ally than the Fourth Republic. In sum, the EDC seemed to be exacerbating, rather than dispelling, tensions within the alliance; within the French foreign ministry, officials became increasingly convinced that it did not serve the country's interests. These interests, Hitchcock emphasizes, had not changed, notwithstanding contemporary accusations that the French were being fickle. Rather, their leaders had ultimately concluded that the EDC was not the proper instrument with which to implement their national strategy.

Following the collapse of the EDC, the British played a crucial role in devising a workable solution, though it was not implemented without difficulty. The FRG's rearmament took place within the framework of the Western European Union and NATO, which it joined in May 1955. By then the Fourth Republic had become embroiled in a bloody and disastrous war to retain Algeria, a conflict which would eventually lead to its collapse three years later. But despite this ignominious end, Hitchcock concludes that the regime had its accomplishments, among them ensuring France a prominent role in the Western Alliance, and a leading role in the building of a united Europe.

The story Hitchcock tells is one of creative adaptation on the part of French officials to an initially unpropitious situation. The basic parameters within which they had to operate, particularly with reference to West Germany, were established in Washington in London.[2] Hitchcock himself clearly recognizes this. He points out, for example, that in 1949 it was Secretary of State Dean Acheson who encouraged Schuman to cooperate with the British and Americans by eliminating some plans to dismantle German industry, and by offering the FRG membership in the Council of Europe. Schuman later brought these proposals before his colleagues to promote the idea of France assuming the leading role in European integration.

Thus, while the Fourth Republic's achievement was impressive, it was also relative. Relative not only to the decidedly unequal power relationship with its allies, but also to the achievements of France's erstwhile foe. After all, during the same period the Bonn Republic also secured an appreciable increase in clout. If the debate over West German rearmament was settled in a manner that allayed French fears, the whole process also, in the view of David Clay Large, partly explains why "down the line, the FRG, rather than France, became America's most important ally on the Continent." [3] No doubt Germany's innate strength, in the context of an escalating Cold War, helps to explain the priority the Americans gave to encouraging Bonn to develop military capability. But West German policy-makers also advanced their own agenda to considerable effect.

Hitchcock's book complements other recent works which challenge the notion that during the immediate postwar era French politics was characterized by confusion and drift.[4] In some respects, the tale he tells is a familiar one. The innovative quality of Schuman's proposal for the European Coal and Steel Community has long been recognized, to give one example.[5] But Hitchcock's account is distinctive in a number of ways. He

convincingly highlights, for instance, how the European policy of Premier Pierre Mendes France was informed by much the same vision as that of Schuman and Bidault, despite Mendes France's reputation for being particularly innovative, energetic, and decisive in comparison to most Fourth Republic politicians. More generally, the book is impressively comprehensive, making use of a wide range of sources from French, British, and American archives. It is also a pleasure to read. Hitchcock does not avoid complexity, but his book is well-structured, and his writing style is clear and lively. All told, this is a solid, perceptive work, sure to be of enduring use to historians of both the early Cold War and contemporary France.

Notes

[1]. Quoted in Frank Costigliola, "The Nuclear Family: Tropes of Gender and Pathology in the Western Alliance", *Diplomatic History* 21:2 (1997), 173.

[2]. A point made by Melvyn Leffler in "The Cold War: What Do 'We Now Know'?", *American Historical Review* 104:2 (1999), 520.

[3]. David Clay Large, *Germans to the Front: West German Rearmament in the Adenauer Era* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 268.

[4]. See, for example, Richard Vinen, *Bourgeois Politics in France, 1945-1951* (Cambridge, 1995).

[5]. Among others, by Herbert Luethy, in *France Against Herself: The Past, Politics, and Crises of Modern France* (Westport, 1955), 382-385.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Sean Kennedy. Review of Hitchcock, William I., *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944-1954*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5194>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.