
H-France Review Vol. 16 (October 2016), No. 247

Robert Frank and Éric Roussel with Vincent Laniol, eds., *Deux passions françaises: Pierre Mendès France et Charles de Gaulle*. Paris: CRNS Éditions, 2014. Notes. 22.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-07995-4.

Review by Sean Kennedy, University of New Brunswick.

Reflecting upon the career of Charles de Gaulle following the general's death in 1970, Pierre Mendès France expressed respect for the former's leadership of the resistance during the Second World War, as well as his postwar political acumen. But Mendès France still regarded the general's return to power in 1958 as amounting to a coup d'état, and consistently disapproved of the executive-oriented structures of the Fifth Republic. Throughout his career, Mendès France articulated a vision of a parliamentary republic rooted in the progressive traditions that shaped him, vastly distinct from de Gaulle's conservative Catholic formation. If anything, Mendès France seemed to migrate leftwards in the later stages of his political career, from Radicalism to the Parti Socialiste Unifié (PSU), though he would quit the latter as well and always distrusted the Communists (the feeling was mutual). During the crisis of 1968, when it appeared that de Gaulle might be forced out of office, Mendès France was touted as the potential prime minister for a new government to be headed by François Mitterrand.[1] Thus despite their cooperation during the Second World War, to a considerable degree Mendès France and de Gaulle were adversaries, even though they respected one another. Moreover, one served as prime minister for less than a year while the other led France's first postwar government and dominated the Fifth Republic for over a decade. How fruitful could a comparison of the two be?

Quite fruitful, as it turns out. As the editors and contributors—a distinguished group of scholars—make clear, while the contrasting backgrounds and convictions of the two men are striking, so are the intersections, parallels, and convergences that marked their careers. Seventeen chapters, organized around the two men's visions of the nation, their programs of republican renewal, the rapidly changing social context in which they operated, and their engagement in international affairs, offer many insights about France in the era of the *Trente Glorieuses*. They also offer some sobering reflections on the challenges that the Fifth Republic faces today.

The opening chapters illustrate how sharply contrasting backgrounds and beliefs were partially reconciled in the face of shared adversity. Éric Roussel relates how, after Mendès France escaped captivity in 1942 he rallied to the Gaullist cause until resigning from the Provisional Government in 1945 due to his dispute with René Pleven over fiscal policy, an argument in which de Gaulle sided with the latter. Despite this rupture, the wartime bond between the two men was powerful, even if Mendès France recognized the profound differences in outlook between himself and the Free French leader: "Le personnage l'avait non point séduit mais plutôt impressionné." (p. 25) In a perceptive analysis of their attitudes and policies towards the military Philippe Vial outlines the contrast between the professional soldier who accepted the possibility, *in extremis*, of military involvement in internal questions and the "civilian in uniform" for whom such a notion was anathema (p. 45). For all that, Vial notes, Mendès France was pragmatic in his dealings with the officer corps and both leaders sought military modernization. Alain-Gérard Slama's chapter is the widest-ranging and most disputatious in this

section. He concisely situates de Gaulle in the context of the three right-wing traditions defined by René Rémond, while depicting Mendès France as an incarnation of Republican ideals. The irony, Slama asserts—conceding that he is not writing from a *mendésiste* perspective—is that the first president of the Fifth Republic respected the principle of the separation of powers, while Mendès France could display authoritarian proclivities: “si de Gaulle a été un temperament autoritaire dominé par un Surmoi républicain, Mendès a été un temperament républicain dominé par un Surmoi autoritaire” (p. 33).

The second section of the book delves deeper into political cultures and structures. Framing her analysis with the concept of “regimes of historicity” as articulated by Reinhart Koselleck and François Hartog, the late Odile Rudelle argues that de Gaulle’s military legitimism could be reconciled with the left-wing patriotism embodied in Mendès France. In a very clear exposition, Serge Berstein similarly emphasizes how antagonistic political cultures could give way to more flexible practices, concluding that both Mendès France and de Gaulle did much to adapt their respective political cultures to the conditions of the postwar era. Guy Carcassonne goes even further in stressing how, in retrospect at least, the goals of the two politicians converged. After making the notable point that Mendès France was initially inclined to abstain rather than vote no in the referendum on the 1958 constitution, he goes on to contend that, in light of recent and planned reforms, the architecture of the Fifth Republic now bears an increasing similarity to what Mendès France intended: the *mendésiste* and Gaullist visions are thus being reconciled.

By contrast, both Jean Massot and Gilles Le Béguec seem more inclined to emphasize contrasts. Massot discusses the capacity of both de Gaulle and Mendès France to draw people to public service but discerns a sharp contrast between their conceptions of leadership. Le Béguec details the extent to which Mendès France, though often known for his party affiliations, engaged in various efforts at *rassemblement*, drawing together people of differing affiliations to achieve efficient government. This approach diverged from that of de Gaulle, who regarded such movements as transcending historic divisions in order to attain broad objectives.

Section three, “Une France des Temps Modernes,” opens with arguably the most substantial chapter in the book. Nicolas Bavarez explores both leaders’ quest for the modernization of the French economy and institutions, in the process situating the *Trentes Glorieuses* in a longer-term trend of the ongoing challenge of revamping the French economy since the turn of the twentieth century. During the war years, Mendès France and de Gaulle converged around the notion of a “progressive market economy” until their parting of the ways in 1945. Yet even afterwards, both encouraged innovation while remaining attentive to the need for social reform. Both also demonstrated short-sightedness in some respects—Bavarez criticizes Mendès France for his intransigent opposition to the Fifth Republic, which marginalized some of the perceptive criticisms he made of the left’s economic program in the 1970s—but in each man, he detects qualities that are badly needed in the current century: “le général de Gaulle et Pierre Mendès France rappellent que la responsabilité premières des citoyens et des dirigeants des démocraties consistent à prendre la mesure des changements historiques, à se réinventer pour s’y adapter, à assumer le choix difficile de la modernisation contre la démagogie qui conduit au déclin économique et à la tyrannie” (p. 191). Comparing the two men’s ideas regarding social reform, Alain Chatriot suggests that while de Gaulle’s concept of workforce “participation” in the capitalist system (which vaguely called for a greater role for wage-earners in shaping capitalist expansion, with concomitant benefits), is better-known than Mendès France’s thinking on social questions, the former’s vision remained ill-defined, while the latter consistently advocated the involvement of workers in shaping their employers’ policies and more broadly the society in which they lived.

Antoine Prost also praises Mendès France for appreciating the need to devote greater resources to scientific research, even though it was de Gaulle who had a sustained opportunity to expand R&D funding. Similarly, de Gaulle was also in a position to carry out extensive educational reforms, though Prost notes that his ministers also had considerable input in this field. However, the general himself, in contrast to Mendès France, never really tried to address himself to youth, with ultimately dire

consequences; “Au moment où il leur imposait une politique d’endiguement et de sélection, il n’avait rien à leur dire: 1968 fut leur réponse” (p. 212). The relationship that each man had with the French public, through rapidly evolving modes of communication, is explored in depth by Jean-François Sirinelli. The author contrasts de Gaulle’s widely praised mastery of both radio and then television with Mendès France’s more didactic, if earnest approach, which seemed better suited to the airwaves than to an on-screen presence. That said, Sirinelli notes that, during the upheavals of 1968, the general’s television appeal of 24 May, intended to restore order, fizzled; it was the radio address he gave six days later that helped to reassert his authority. Sirinelli closes by lamenting the current prospects for informed democratic debate, as developments in the closing decades of the twentieth century have nurtured “l’arrivée de l’ère du lapidaire; faire court pour être écouté et entendu” (p. 256).

The final section of the book compares the international policies of the two leaders. Here the majority of the contributors seem more impressed by Mendès France’s vision for France in the post-1945 world, quite limited though his time in office was, than de Gaulle’s determined and controversial quest for grandeur. At the end of her concise analyses of Franco-Anglo-American relations during 1940-1945 and 1952-1958, Élisabeth du Réau notes the depth of each leader’s commitment to nuclear weapons and their determination to have France recognized “au premier rang des grandes nations occidentales” (p. 316). But the other authors, while never denying commonalities, are more inclined to highlight differences. Concentrating upon their responses to decolonization, Frédéric Turpin concedes each of them expressed pride in France’s colonial past and struggled to accept that even a liberal imperial framework could not accommodate Algerian nationalism. But Turpin suggests that Mendès France’s vision of cooperation with the Third World was more inclusive than de Gaulle’s, even though the latter acknowledged the need to enhance connections with the global South beyond France’s former colonies. Georges-Henri Soutou similarly concludes that Mendès France was more principled in his European policy than the general, whose diplomacy was shaped by a narrower understanding of French national interests.

In the widest-ranging contribution to this section, Robert Frank distinguishes between de Gaulle’s unbending quest for international rank and Mendès France’s goal of articulating a constructive international role for France. Unlike the general, he avoided needlessly antagonizing the Americans, and the rapidity of his disengagement from Indochina is notable in comparison to the bloodshed in Algeria that persisted after de Gaulle returned to power in 1958. Frank does not deny de Gaulle’s capacity to evolve as a statesman, but ultimately is more impressed by Mendès France’s realism: “Mendès ne supporte pas les illusions dans lesquelles de Gaulle maintient les Français au sujet de la place de la France dans le monde. La ‘vérité,’ voilà un des maîtres mots de ses discours qui a forgé un charisme mendésien d’un autre type que le gaullien. Préférant les comptes aux contes, souhaitant vérifier les comptes de la puissance plutôt de s’en laisser conter, il a pris le risque de nouer des liens moins durables avec les Français” (p. 329).

The book closes with reflections by Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac. Rioux incisively outlines how de Gaulle, who had become very controversial for much of the French public by the end of his second presidential term, has enjoyed widespread public approval since 1990. Yet if the general has left a huge imprint upon France’s collective memory, Rioux also stresses Mendès France’s enduring “mark” upon the nation’s political culture. Though rather isolated by the time of his death—it took until 2003 for his name to be given to an avenue in Paris—he has endured as a source of inspiration to the left, not because his political decisions were always correct, but because of his fearless commitment to the truth and republican ideals. Crémieux-Brilhac skillfully blends personal recollection, synthesis of the other contributions, and his own analysis in the closing chapter. Reaffirming key parallels between the two, notably how they attained power in acute crises, Crémieux is forthright in wondering if Mendès France was truly “un homme de pouvoir.” “Homme de principes et de scrupules, on est tenté de se demander s’il n’a pas été bridé aussi dans la quête du pouvoir à la fois par sa judéité et, plus encore, par la marque indélébile des outrages dont il avait été accablé par la presse d’avant-guerre,

Mendès Bessarabie, Mendès France, ce n'est pas un nom, c'est un adresse – et j'en passe. La question reste ouverte” (pp. 356-357).

Given the fact that *Deux passions françaises* was published in association with the Institut Pierre Mendès France, it is perhaps not a surprise that the latter often emerges rather favorably from comparisons with de Gaulle. But this book is a valuable work of considered scholarship rather than hagiography; there are diverging opinions and critical perspectives on both politicians. That said, a number of contributors seem to share the conviction that France's current political establishment is lacking the vision and qualities that Mendès France and de Gaulle had to offer. To be sure, the challenges that the country currently faces are formidable and it does not have the benefit of sustained albeit inflationary economic growth to ease its ills, as was generally the case in the 1950s and 1960s.^[2] But is the scale of the problems facing France greater now than during the Algerian War, and is public discontent more volcanic than it was in 1968?^[3]

My question is not intended to encourage complacency—a dangerous proclivity—but to point out that, in the final years of the Fourth Republic, there was a widespread sense that France was adrift, with various politicians weighed in the balance and found wanting. And yet leaders arose who had the capacity to see problems clearly, and took energetic, albeit sometimes very flawed measures to address them. We can only hope that those who currently constitute the French political elite will soon reaffirm that these capacities still exist.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Vincent Laniol, Robert Frank & Éric Roussel, “Préface”

Éric Roussel, “Un recontre en résistance”

Alain-Gérard Slama, “Deux certaines idées de la France”

Philippe Vial, “Les armes, l'armée, la Défense”

Odile Rudelle, “Pierre Mendès France et Charles de Gaulle: Deux régimes d'historicité”

Serge Berstein, “Pierre Mendès France et Charles de Gaulle: deux âges de la culture politique républicaine”

Guy Carcassonne, “La règle et le consentement”

Jean Massot, “L'État et son service”

Gilles Le Béguet, “Pierre Mendès France, les partis, le rassemblement”

Nicolas Bavarez, “Pierre Mendès France et Charles de Gaulle face à la modernisation économique de la France”

Antoine Prost, “Mendès France, de Gaulle, la recherche et l'éducation”

Alain Chatriot, “Pierre Mendès France et Charles de Gaulle: Le progress social et la solidarité”

Jean-François Sirinelli, “L'âge de la culture de masse”

Frédéric Turpin, "Pour un monde décolonisé: Pierre Mendès France et Charles de Gaulle, deux visions contradictoires?"

Georges-Henri Soutou, "La France et l'Europe: conceptions, objectifs, arrière-pensées"

Élisabeth du Réau, "Londres et Washington dans la vision géopolitique et l'oeuvre de Charles de Gaulle et Pierre Mendès France"

Robert Frank, "De la puissance"

Jean-Pierre Rioux, "La marque et la trace"

Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, "Conclusion"

NOTES

[1] On Mendès France during the complex events of 1968, see the classic biography by Jean Lacouture, *Pierre Mendès France* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), trans. by George Holoch as *Pierre Mendes France* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1984), pp. 402-415.

[2] For recent analysis of the multifaceted problems facing France today, see Mark Lilla, "France: Is There a Way Out?" *New York Review of Books* 63/4(10 March 2016):19-22 and "How the French Face Terror," *New York Review of Books* 63/5(24 March 2016):37-39.

[3] For contemporary essays that capture the combination of malaise, anxiety, and deep frustration often evinced by the French population in the 1950s and 1960s, see Philip M. Williams, *French Politicians & Elections 1951-1969* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

Sean Kennedy
University of New Brunswick, Fredericton
skennedy@unb.ca

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172