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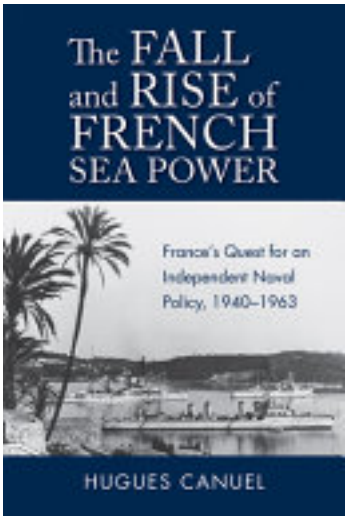

Hugues Canuel, *The Fall and Rise of French Sea Power: France's Quest for an Independent Naval Policy, 1940-1963*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021.

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France went from being statistically the first world power with an army of 8 million servicemen just before World War I to insignificance and even foreign occupation in World War II. But that regression is better traced in naval power as it went back exactly a century before WW I, that is to the battle of Waterloo in 1815. In the aftermath of Waterloo, England—France's mortal enemy—never ceased taking its

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revenge against the latter for actively dispossessing London of its thirteen North American colonies in 1776. Indeed, the decimation of the French fleet in Mers-el-Kébir (near Oran in French Algeria) by the Royal Navy on 3 July 1940 paid for France's aid to American colonists. Churchill's excuse at that time was a well-dressed justification specifying his *alleged* mortal fear of having that part of the French fleet fall into the hands of *The Kriegsmarine*, Hitler's navy. I highlight *alleged* because Churchill's mathematicians cracked the Enigma code and could read that the Nazis had no intention of deploying those pieces of captured French fleet against the Allies. Someone with Churchill's breadth of historical knowledge and sense of dark humor cannot miss his satisfaction in evening the score of 1776. Without registering this long historical arch, no account of French sea power can make sense. France's descent from world leadership stretches back to the time before the birth of the republic, not a mere two decades in the middle of the twentieth century as the book under consideration in this review proposes.

To begin with, the *fall* in Hugues Canuel's title refers to the circumstances leading to the Nazi occupation of France in 1940, and the *rise* accounts for the latter's decision to join the nuclear club in 1958. Canuel, therefore, surveys roughly two decades wherein he follows the fortunes of France's naval power. Undeniably, one can note a rise in that sea power, a rise that was precipitated by a fall, a disastrous one for that matter, but the emergent rise remains chimerical because, at the moment of the fall, France used to be a great empire, and when the presumptuous rising was bombastically announced to the world in 1963, France had just lost most of its prized colonies: Indochina, Algeria, and Madagascar.

Taking two decades as its time framework, Canuel's book grapples with the fortunes of France's *La Marine Nationale*. The study traces this navy as it was divided between dispersed naval units under the control of the collaborationist regime of Vichy (after the defeat in July 1940) and those small units that escaped to England in the following months and were commanded by Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle, the leader of Free France in exile. As the US diplomatically recognized Vichy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt adamantly refused to recognize de Gaulle's structure, Free France with its Free French Fleet, and preferred to deal with another dissident from Vichy, de Gaulle's nemesis, Vice Admiral Émile Muselier. The rivalry and disunion within the

French navy leadership was later exacerbated when the Allies approached General François Darlan in Algiers, a Vichy loyalist, to facilitate landing in North Africa in November 1942. Darlan's assassination a mere six weeks later did not ease matters for that navy. Indeed, Canuel wants us to trust that it was this same navy, marred by disunity and foreign influence (not only defeat), that in the space of two decades somehow magically manage to surmount major challenges, rebuild itself from scratch, and become somehow equal with, for example, the Royal Navy or the United States Navy.

This wishful thinking cannot stand scrutiny. Meanwhile, such an assessment cannot deny that statistical improvements in the number of active units, their qualitative capabilities, and overall tonnage by 1963, "with three hundred vessels displacing more than 745,000 tons" (241), was quite a significant growth in such a short period. Still, the decision to allocate considerable sums from the defense budgets to initially terrestrial, and subsequently nuclear, chapters is indicative of the French Admirals' understanding not only of the changing role of the Navy in the Cold War context but the overall constraints imposed by the United States as the power that continually cashed in on its victory in WWII. The world still remembers how President Donald Trump in November 2018 reacted to French President Emmanuel Macron's allusion to the need to create an independent/true European army. Trump angrily retorted: "Without the U.S. help in two world wars, today's Parisians would be speaking German."[1] More important than the rivalry and divisions that marked the top leadership of the French navy in the two decades of this study are allied naval cooperation, the military aid programs, and other structures which impacted not only the rebuilding of the French Navy but its autonomy of movement. The abrupt, even humiliating, end of the Suez campaign of 1956 speaks volumes concerning the limitations of the French naval planners.

Apart from an introduction and conclusion, *The Rise and Fall of French Sea Power* has eight chapters. They follow the progress achieved by the French navy chronologically. Each chapter starts with an incident that marks the phase and propels

[1] David Charter and Oliver Moody, "French Would Be Speaking German Without Us, Trump Tells Macron," *The Times* (UK), 14 November 2018, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/french-would-be-speaking-german-without-us-trump-tells-macron-cw668ssdw

the spirits behind the decisions taken or untaken. Busy readers can focus on only the first and last chapters as these two crystalize the idea of chimerical rise. Indeed, these two chapters are decisive for accurately gauging the fall and rise.

In Chapter 1, "Building Up a Free French Fleet," Canuel traces those early efforts to start a navy from scratch. The start here is pretty dismal as the chapter provides necessary context for the efforts that emerged from the nadir of the French navy after France's defeat in June 1940, the decimation of its fleet in Mers-el-Kébir by the Royal Navy a month or so later, and the Wehrmacht's foundering of 248,800 tons of capital ships, escorts, submarines and other auxiliaries in Toulon 27 November 1942 (61). Readers find that Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle, a leader of the Free French movement in London, cooperated with Vice Admiral Émile Muselier to salvage parts of the French fleet that either fled France just before German occupation or managed to join England later. We read that de Gaulle truly struggled to win Churchill's recognition of his small but considerable naval units as a Free French fleet, not a foreign legion fighting under the British flag, as was the situation with the Belgians or the Dutch. In return for this status, de Gaulle promised to rally political support within the French colonial empire and contribute to the allies' war efforts (18). Discord in the Free French movement emerged as Muselier pushed for "navy-to-navy" agreements with the First Sea Lord (23), a situation that did not appeal to the politically compromising de Gaulle.

The second chapter, "Laying the Foundations for Rearmament: 'The Americans Have Landed'," accentuates that before the end of WWII, the layers of future armaments had been set. Suffice it to recall that while constantly taken under Churchill's wing, de Gaulle did not impress Roosevelt. This was why de Gaulle's request for armament was not included in the famous American Lend-Lease Act, the structure that provided armament for the allies' armies and fighting units. De Gaulle had to pass his requests via the British, with all the bureaucratic hurdles and delays. Recall again that this exceptionally critical armament situation came in a context where the United States was not officially in the war yet, that is, when Roosevelt had recognized the Vichy Republic. After Pearl Harbor and during the Casablanca Conference, Roosevelt brought with him his French protégé, General Henri Giraud. This explains that when the time came for the Allies' landing in North Africa in early

November 1942, de Gaulle was kept in the dark. After the landing, the Americans envisioned rearming the French navy for immediate and pressing war efforts in Tunisia. The French generals both in Algiers and London wanted to rearm to carry out independent action. French admirals and generals wanted to assume leading positions, not remain relegated to or distrusted with secondary roles, and be bypassed from strategic planning.

Chapter 3, "Rearming for War: Allied Framework, French Rivalry," discusses that to appease French demands, important French warships like *Richelieu* and *Montcalm* were accepted for refitting in the US whenever space became available. Those pieces of the fleet that joined the allied war efforts were pre-war designs and that is why they were assigned – after refitting – mostly protection, convoy, and cost guards roles. These are roles that made perfect sense as the French navy had no aircraft carriers, no fast battleships, and no heavy cruisers or advanced submarines. Still, the French navy officers wanted more. After the landing in North Africa, "the rebuilding of Giraud's navy took place in the larger allied framework" (77) wherein Giraud's requests were considered a challenge for the ongoing theatre of battle in Tunisia and later on in Libya.

Chapter 4 is "Planning for an Uncertain Peace: End of An Alliance, Rebuilding Alone." After the end of WWII, readers find a disgruntled French leadership that although boasting of 400 ships and submarines, with a rank of 4th worldwide, did not nevertheless share the laurels with the victors. After the war, French decision-makers tailored defense budgets for peace. High-ranking naval officers such as Paul Lemonnier aimed toward "a humbler *flotte de transition*, a post-war transition fleet based on a sober assessment of conditions likely to prevail after the defeat of Germany" (119). The unfolding of events as illustrated through the coming chapters proves that Lemonnier's plan was more a miscalculation.

Chapter 5, "Facing Opportunities, Threats, and Uncertainties: *la défense du Rhine*," is where one reads that well before the end of hostilities and exactly in December 1944, de Gaulle visited Moscow seeking rearmament of his navy and army. This prompted the United States not to abandon France and other allies lest they defect to the Soviet camp. It is here where it becomes evident that Washington's offer to rearm France subscribed to a policy of containment rather than to mutual respect between victorious allies or equal partners. Similarly, London become worried about Paris' plans to acquire

or build aircraft carriers and naval aviation. In this context, Lemonnier uncovered his famous plan for the defense of the Rhine, France's border with Germany (historically, its mortal enemy). With Lemonnier's plan, the French navy was charged again with insignificant roles, something the US and England always wanted.

Chapter 6, "Returning to a Strategy of Alliance: A Beautiful Friendship or Bitter Déjà Vu," underlines the situation spearheaded by the Soviets' detonation of their first atomic bomb on August 29, 1949. The Cold War became increasingly tense and the framework known as the Western Union (former allied nation minus the USSR) was reactivated under the umbrella of the NATO. Finance for rearmament become suddenly available under a program known Mutual Defense Assistance Act (MDAA). Nevertheless, and contrary to what French admirals wanted, NATO's defense strategy specified that the French army was assigned "to keep the assailant from crossing the Rhine" (158). In other words, strategic bombing and leadership roles were reserved for *les Anglo-Saxons*. To the dismay of French admirals and army generals, France would provide boots on the ground to be deployed east of the Rhine in the eventuality of war with the Soviet Union. American Secretary of State George Marshall wanted a dwarfed role for the French navy, with no aircraft carrier or other means for independent maneuverings characteristic of modern sea power. This explains the French navy's setbacks in Indochina in 1950.

Chapter 7 is "Building a Blue-Water Fleet: Clashing Visions at Home and Abroad." With the militarization of US military aid after 1949, French planners and members of the establishment felt the need for an independent blue-waters fleet. The events leading to "the Suez embarrassment showed the limits of France's influence on events overseas and the continued inability of [its] fleet to operate autonomously" (179). Overcoming the division of its political class, and as early as 1951, the consensus in France specified the need for at least 3 aircraft carriers (later this need was augmented to 5) and 32 fleet destroyers among other necessary *materiel*. Indeed, France started "an aggressive program of domestic shipbuilding… [but such a step proved] to be among France's long history of haphazard interest in its navy" (204). The decision to enter the nuclear age as shown in Chapter 8 proves how the planners were erratic in their planning; their exasperation with the US administration's containment policies gave a hard blow to their planning for the navy.

Chapter 8 is titled "Going Nuclear: Bases and Submarines." Even before the second coming of General de Gaulle to power in 1958, France had plans to enter the nuclear age. But de Gaulle substantiated those plans, beginning with his decision to terminate France's part in the integrated forces under the NATO umbrella. Let us recall that without coming under NATO wings, France could not receive military aid. But France was infuriated because of the US's tacit support for decolonization, German rearmament, and public criticism of France's policy in Algeria. What matters in what looks like a bold decision is how the fear of nuclear attack made investments in the navy look like a waste of capital. Among competing priorities and the sudden passion for nuclear weapons, Canuel reports how "French admirals accepted to suspend most work on the navy's shore infrastructure…" (215). After the loss of Algeria, de Gaulle declared that France's nuclear tests and research be both geared toward building his country's "deterrence of the strong by the weak (221) or *la dissuasion du faible au fort*. Beyond the spectacle of a renewed grandeur, the declaration in diplomatic parlance sent assuaging signals to decision-makers in Washington that France did not mean to harm American interests; it only wanted to be respected and welcomed to the nuclear club. Meanwhile, the plans for upgrading the navy stay languishing, if not altogether rotting, until some future notice. The inhibitive cost of any nuclear program made the navy satisfied with only two nuclear-propelled submarines, one motored with enriched uranium and the other with natural uranium (233).

Thus, it becomes crystal clear, for the interested reader, let alone the dedicated defense specialist, that the rise Canuel meticulously details is but a phraseology, another variation of the fall. The wording in the titles of the chapters succeeds in communicating what the volume's title either unintentionally mistakes or willingly confuses. For after the fall which accounts for "nearly losing the entire fleet during World War II" (4), what emerges is several hesitations, half-cooked plans, miscalculations, and a realization that without the US's prior agreement, almost nothing works. Through NATO procedural structures of technical and financial cooperation, French navy planners and even their politicians realized that France's rescuing from Hitler's snares came with the price of *se fait avec les Anglo-Saxons*, or more exactly, abiding with the victors' order, the Americans.

The number of American tacit infiltrations and vacillations reached the tipping point where all French planners' attempts to evade Americans' dictates come to naught. The procedural structures were renewed or precisely brought from under the carpet exactly by 1949 to counter the alleged Soviet nuclear threats, that is, by the time that almost no one in France asked whether indeed the Soviet Union was a threat or whether this was instead America's strategy to take weary Europeans under its wings. By the time de Gaulle came to power again in 1958, with his reconciliatory approach vis-à-vis historical Russia (his constant and qualification of the Soviet Union), few among his political class understood him or took him seriously. The limited success of the Non-Aligned movement in which de Gaulle worked with Naser (of Egypt) and other world leaders to found a multi-lateral world order similarly underlined the extent of American propaganda regarding who the true antagonist was.

Hence why American policymakers assuaged the leaders of the fourth republic with a green light to build a second aircraft carrier. Meanwhile, American planners wanted to ensure that the French Navy stayed containable, that is, literally incapable of independent or anti-American missions. Similarly, Washington authorized for de Gaulle the construction of a deterrent nuclear power, more for prestige than anything solid or remotely threatening autonomous action on the part of the French. But the decision to go nuclear was sold to the French public as an unparalleled achievement, and the spectacle covered Washington's active role in weeding out Algeria and other colonies, facilitating French survival from defeat in Indochina, Algeria, and other colonies.

Perhaps the chimeric rise is the reason why the book should be retitled "the fall and decimation of French sea power." With the inhibitive cost of nuclear power, the decision to go nuclear at the beginning of the 1960s came at the expense of truly building a competitive sea power, comparable to that of the US. Missing from Canuel's analysis is the fact that any navy or army cannot operate as an independent totality. Small or large, a navy translates a nation's economic power and ambitions to expand that power. Great powers do not build navies or go nuclear for the sole purpose of displaying them around as fancy gadgets. With World War II and decolonization afterward, the French navy only translated its long historical decline, a destiny that

started with Napolean's defeat at Waterloo in 1815. No stateman be it de Gaulle or otherwise could escape the historical arch of one's nation and its destiny.

Fouad Mami is a literature scholar from Algeria. An Africanist by training, his field of interest lies at the crossroads between North and West African along with the larger Mediterranean literatures and arts. His essays and book reviews have appeared in outlets such as Postcolonial Studies, The Journal of North African Studies, and Jadaliyya, among others.