

# H-Net Reviews

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Jean-Louis Cremieux-Brilhac. *La France Libre: de l'Appel du 18 Juin a la Liberation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996. 969 pp. FF 198.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-2-07-073032-2.

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Curiously, the Free French movement has been little studied. The abundant literature about its founder, a generous supply of memoirs from participants, and General Charles de Gaulle's own writings provide an impression that much is known about the Free French. Apart from the biographies of de Gaulle, notably Jean Lacouture's first volume, *De Gaulle: le rebelle* (Paris, 1984) there are only two very brief studies of the Free French movement: Henri Michel's *Histoire de la France libre* (Paris, 1980 [4th ed.]), now dated, and Jean-Paul Cointet's *La France libre* (Paris, 1975) which consists of a brief (30 pp.) introductory essay to a selection of documents. The impression derived from these biographies and brief histories is that the story of the Free French is the story of wartime Gaullism. Thanks to Jean-Louis Cremieux-Brilhac, who has brought to his history of the Free French the same thoroughness and scrupulous attention to detail and sources which marked his two previous works on France during the year of defeat, *Les Francais de l'an 40*, vol. I: *La Guerre oui ou non?* ; vol. II: *Ouvriers et soldats* (Paris, 1990), we now have an impressive, extensively documented, magisterial history of the Free French movement. The author has consulted a wide range of archival sources in France, Great Britain, and the United States, and he has interviewed many surviving participants. It is a moving story. After following Free France from its beginnings among those French exiles in London who refused the armistice and the inhabitants of scattered outposts of the empire who rallied to the Free French banner in 1940, the reader has difficulty not being touched by Cremieux-Brilhac's final chapter with its heading, taken from de Gaulle, "Paris, ah! Paris..." when the external resistance, represented by the Free French, united with the internal resistance movements at the time of liberation in a moment of unity, exhilaration,

and pride restored.

The dominating figure of de Gaulle and the supporting mystique of Gaullism explain why there has not been an extensive history of the Free French. Without taking away from de Gaulle's singular accomplishment in virtually willing Free France into existence, the Free French movement was also a history of a group of individuals who "started from nothing" in the phrase of Rene Cassin. As de Gaulle himself noted, Free France was "built out of match sticks." For all of its heroic and emotional appeal, the image, or cultivated memory of Paris liberated by its own devices and France reunited on its own terms has become part of a powerful Gaullist myth, conceived out of the need to find the basis for unity after years of humiliation, compromises, divisions, collaboration, occupation, and resistance. As a participant in the Free French movement, Cremieux-Brilhac brings to his history a personal sense of commitment: "This book," he notes, "is not neutral," but at a distance of fifty years he also offers a sense of detachment and a determination to reveal the realities and complexities which lie behind the memories and the constructed myths. He wants to remind the generation of his grandchildren that the success of the Free French and the triumph of its leader was not a foregone conclusion. Nor is this a history of the internal resistance, only that part of it formed outside of France. In his account Cremieux-Brilhac gives credit to the many individuals who often worked in de Gaulle's shadow but provided important and necessary services to the cause of Free France. These individuals including General Georges Catroux, who accepted de Gaulle's leadership despite his own higher military rank; Rene Pleven, who served faithfully in many capacities and provided steady judgment within the inner councils of the movement; Rene Massigli and Pierre Vienot, who



brought diplomatic skills to the task of gaining recognition and acceptance for Free France; and the often overlooked contribution of Maurice Schumann, whose broadcasts over the BBC brought the message of Free France into France. The detailed story told is one of the movement's steady growth, but *La France libre* also tries to dispel some of the misunderstandings which have grown up around Free France, and in this sense it is a more complex and nuanced history than can be found in the orthodox Gaullist version.

Cremieux-Brilhac, the historian, turns both a sympathetic and a critical eye on some of the myths that have been generated about episodes of the Free French odyssey and de Gaulle's remarkable struggle to recreate a French identity which would overcome the humiliation of 1940. One reason suggested for the absence of a thorough history of Free France is that Free France became an embalmed, "fixed legend," a "private preserve," a "bloc," as the French Revolution became a bloc during a century of republican historiography, ultimately frozen into an "Image of Epinal established by the *War Memoirs* of General de Gaulle" (p. 33). In taking a fresh, comprehensive look at the French movement in light of the now available archival sources, Cremieux-Brilhac examines certain myths which are part of the Gaullist legacy. Consulting a wide variety of sources, Cremieux-Brilhac is better able to place in perspective Gaullist claims by making what the author calls "a double reading" of the sources and published texts. We may begin with the conclusion of the book where in the final paragraph to a brief but thoughtful epilogue, Cremieux-Brilhac identifies three myths about Free France left by de Gaulle. One is that Free France *was* France; the second is that for its survival Free France had to resist the encroachments of the Anglo-Saxon goliaths with as much determination as it put into the fight against Naziism; and that France, guided by its own will, liberated itself (p. 918).

The first task for de Gaulle and his followers was to establish the movement's legitimacy. From the beginning, de Gaulle insisted that he and his few partisans were France. Making good this claim meant not only the formation of a fighting force to maintain a French presence in the war but also the creation of a political movement. The first step came with de Gaulle's negotiations with British prime minister, Winston Churchill, leading to the agreement of 7 August 1940 which recognized Free France not as a military "legion" but as an ally responsible for developing its own military formations. De Gaulle's headquarters at Carlton Gardens was as much a government in exile as a military headquar-

ters. Cremieux-Brilhac rightly notes the way in which de Gaulle created what amounted to instruments for the exercise of political authority. Steps along the way included the formation of the Council for the Defense of the Empire on 26 October 1940, a kind of consulting body for management of the imperial territories which had rallied to the Free French, and the formation of the French Committee of National Liberation (FCNL) in September 1941. Although not formally recognized, de Gaulle had produced what amounted to a government in exile, rejecting Vichy's claims to be the true voice of France. By the end of 1941 de Gaulle could insist, "There is no longer a France and a Free France. There is only one France, that of General de Gaulle" (p. 209).

De Gaulle's insistence that he and his movement alone represented French interests, combined with an absence of any statement of adherence to democratic principles during the early years of the movement (1940-1941), led U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt to conclude that de Gaulle's pretension revealed an authoritarian streak and an ambition to impose a personal dictatorship upon France. De Gaulle understood that his determination to exercise a strong, central authority without the hesitations and weaknesses of the Third Republic created difficulties in his relations with the Allies, but when Churchill pressed him to look more democratic, de Gaulle refused to compromise the unity of the movement or to modify his "certain idea of France" to please his Allies since many people in France and among the Free French themselves associated "democracy" with the weaknesses and discredited policies of the defeated Third Republic's parliamentary system. De Gaulle's vision of a revived and stronger France required unity on his terms, and he considered those exiles who failed to rally to be sowers of disunity at a time of national crisis. "One is either with me or against me," he declared. Cremieux-Brilhac notes that those who disagreed or broke with de Gaulle, such as Andre Labarthe, Raymond Aron, Admiral Emile Mueselien, also questioned de Gaulle's republicanism and fed the alarms about his political intentions. De Gaulle persisted nevertheless in his determination to see a strong and independent France emerge at the end of the conflict.

Cremieux-Brilhac considers the months from late 1941 into the summer of 1942 to have been the decisive time in which it became clear that the Free French had gained legitimacy in the eyes of public opinion in France, whatever doubts persisted among the non-Gaullist exiles or in the minds of Churchill and Roosevelt. For the first year and a half the Free French movement was

largely based upon the empire. Contacts with emerging resistance movements inside France were limited, and Colonel Passy's (Andre Dewavrin) intelligence operations had few sources of information as to the evolution of public opinion within France. By late 1941, however, the Free French became better known among resistance groups, thanks to regular broadcasts over the BBC, and by the spring and summer of 1942 resistance leaders and important political figures, including Leon Blum and Edouard Herriot, pledged support for de Gaulle. Increasingly metropolitan opinion looked to de Gaulle as a symbol of resistance and as the leader who would bring liberation and renewal.

Cremieux-Brilhac also emphasizes the importance of Jean Moulin's mission in establishing contacts with resistance movements of various political persuasions inside France, including the Communists. These connections have led some historians to accuse Moulin of being an agent of the Soviet Union, a charge rejected by Cremieux-Brilhac. He notes that de Gaulle was anxious to broaden the ideological basis of the Free French movement, and he courted political support on the left in his statement of 24 April 1942 to Christian Pineau, a socialist trade union leader, which outlined the basis of political Gaullism. This statement stressed a commitment to republican ideals and advocated a new social foundation for a renewed France. In addition to the rallied portions of the Free French empire, support from internal resistance movements of various political tendencies increasingly provided the basis for de Gaulle's claim that Free France represented French hopes as well as French interests.

With the first major success at arms of the Free French at Bir Hakeim (26 May-11 June 1942) to which Cremieux-Brilhac devotes considerable attention for its political as well as military significance, Free France, henceforth Fighting France, appeared destined to be among the victors. Cremieux-Brilhac observes that the mixture of volunteers from the rallied portions of the empire and exiles from France at Bir Hakeim symbolized the diverse character of the Free French movement, forged into a small but effective fighting force. The final step in the political legitimation of Free France came with the transfer of the French Committee of National Liberation to Algiers in the summer of 1943. The familiar contest for power between de Gaulle and the hopelessly outmatched General Henri Giraud follows a familiar outline. For Cremieux-Brilhac this was a contest between Free France and "Vichy bis". Although de Gaulle prevailed in this contest and eliminated a number of Vichy collaborators, he also welcomed into his ranks military

commanders who had served Vichy under the Armistice Army, notably generals Alphonse Juin and Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, who supported de Gaulle but were not necessarily Gaullists. The first meeting of the Provisional Consultative Assembly in Algiers 3 November 1943 included representatives from a wide range of political parties and interests from Communists to conservatives, indicating that the Free French movement had broadened from the "one man show" (p. 586) of London to become "The French Republic of Algiers" with effective control over all of the French empire except for Indochina and metropolitan France itself.

Free France had grown but did not yet represent all of France. There were still the dissident exiles in London and Washington; there was still another France to be confronted—that of Vichy—at the time of the Allied landings; and there was the still to be defined the role which the various resistance movements inside France would play at the time of liberation and in any provisional government. Free France was not yet France, whatever de Gaulle's success in building support and legitimacy from a variety of supporters. The final triumph depended upon the liberation of metropolitan France, which would be the ultimate contest for legitimacy and acceptance. Once more the role of the Allies would be important and once more de Gaulle would do battle with his adversaries. A major question was whether Free France could liberate itself despite what de Gaulle believed to be the hostile intentions of the Allies.

Perhaps the myth which has become most enshrined in the historiography of Gaullism is the legendary quarrel between the solitary knight, de Gaulle, and the leviathans, Churchill and Roosevelt. These disputes turned on a variety of issues, but most notably revolved around the question of empire and the issue of France's role in the postwar world. Imperial rivalry sparked spectacular disputes between de Gaulle and Churchill, notably over Syria, as has been well chronicled and further explored by Cremieux-Brilhac. With the United States' entry into the war, the de Gaulle-Churchill relationship took second place to Churchill's ties with FDR. De Gaulle resented his exclusion from the councils of grand strategy—a resentment felt throughout the ranks of the Free French—and he was left to divine Allied intentions. He suspected the worst, particularly when it came to relations with the United States.

Were American intentions as sinister as de Gaulle suspected? Certainly Cremieux-Brilhac agrees with the many critics of Roosevelt's antipathy and distrust of de

Gaule, which ignited hostility among the Free French and fuelled resentment that the future of France might be determined in Washington. He tries to fathom the source of FDR's stubborn refusal to find even a working accommodation with the Free French as they gained strength and as the moment of liberation approached when common sense and military interest would have seemed to dictate cooperation. In this double reading Cremieux-Brilhac relies upon his own investigations into the archives at Hyde Park and in Washington, and he benefits from a judicious reading of Mario Rossi's *Roosevelt and the French* (Westport, Conn., 1994). Certainly there was more to American distrust of de Gaulle than Roosevelt's animosity. The language used by anti-Gaullist officials in Washington was often as dismissive or condescending as that of FDR. Yet Cremieux-Brilhac suggests that an image of fixed hostility toward de Gaulle within the American political and military hierarchies may have been exaggerated for French political purposes. Accusations of American intentions to interfere in French affairs united diverse factions in Algiers. Fear of American domination also justified de Gaulle playing the Soviet card as an alternative to dependence upon the "Anglo-Saxon" powers, ironically confirming the accusations of Alexis Leger, the former general secretary at the Quai d'Orsay, who warned officials in the State Department that de Gaulle's pro-Soviet tendencies made him unreliable. De Gaulle believed that standing up to the Americans and threatening to turn to the Soviets heightened his own popularity in Algiers.

While the image of de Gaulle challenging an Anglo-American hegemony played well in Algiers, Cremieux-Brilhac observes that de Gaulle had acquired advocates within the British Foreign Office and within the American military establishment who argued for a more realistic approach in dealing with the Free French. The Foreign Office, often at odds with Churchill's desire to placate FDR, worked steadily from early 1943 to promote cooperation and support for de Gaulle and the Free French. American military officials in the field, Admiral Harold Stark in London and General Dwight Eisenhower in Algiers, called for closer relations with an organization which would be useful at the time of the Allied landings in Normandy. On the eve of that event virtually the entire American military establishment, including General George C. Marshall, U.S. Chief of Staff, and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, concluded that the Free French leader was the only realistic alternative to chaos at the time of liberation. Furthermore, Cremieux-Brilhac demolishes the claim, which has become a fix-

ture of Gaullist literature, that the Allies and particularly the Americans intended to impose a military government upon liberated France (the AMGOT or Allied Military Government of Overseas Territories). Based upon his reading of British and American sources, Cremieux-Brilhac establishes that AMGOT was dead by the beginning of 1944, and he provides a more nuanced reading of the intentions of these sympathetic advocates of accommodation than can be found in Gaullist accounts, notably in Jean Lacouture's biography, which relies extensively upon French sources. Cremieux-Brilhac also dismisses Free French fears that the Americans might cut a last-minute deal with Vichyites as a way of keeping de Gaulle from power. He demonstrates that Eisenhower intended to deal with the Free French officials whom de Gaulle had designated for the administration of France and would have no dealings with Vichy. By the time of the landings and liberation General de Gaulle had gained the support and sympathy of the Allied military command and was less isolated than Gaullists have claimed.

Finally, was France liberated by its own means? Here the liberation of Paris has become the great moment of triumph for the Free French, a triumph presumably over American hesitations to enter the city and a triumph for de Gaulle in gaining control of the capital, forestalling a supposed Communist seizure of power. Again, Cremieux-Brilhac modifies the heroic vision of de Gaulle, the *cavalier seule*, triumphing over his Allied adversaries by showing that Eisenhower's reservations about becoming bogged down in street-fighting in Paris were quickly overcome, and his promise that the French forces of General Leclerc (Philippe de Hauteclocque) would lead the way into the capital was readily fulfilled. De Gaulle's suspicion that Roosevelt's hostility lay behind Eisenhower's initial reluctance was, according to the author, completely unfounded as he found no evidence in the American archives of such an intention. Eisenhower and General Omar Bradley, commander of the American army group responsible for this sector of the front, quickly agreed, as de Gaulle had insisted, that Leclerc's second tank division should make the dash for Paris as soon as it became apparent that the city had risen up. As for the feared Communist seizure of power, recent literature demonstrates that a revolutionary coup was not the intention of the F.F.I. (French Forces of the Interior), or its leader, Colonel Rol Tanguy. The liberation of Paris was a combined triumph for the Free French and for the several elements of the internal French resistance, which contributed to that moment of unity. Paris had been liberated thanks to the Free French, but also thanks to

the heroic efforts of the resistance and with the support and good wishes of the Allies. What occurred was a triumphal moment with all of its well-deserved, if painfully achieved glory.

Cremieux-Brilhac's placing of certain Gaullist myths in historical context does not diminish de Gaulle's accomplishments nor the success of the Free French. If anything, it gives depth and complexity to the historical reality of the time, which is successfully recaptured. Cremieux-Brilhac illuminates the collective history of the Free French after years of unquestioned Gaullist orthodoxy. A comparison between the approach of Cremieux-Brilhac and that of Lacouture in his biography of de Gaulle, is to measure the distance between fine history

and good but partisan political journalism. Cremieux-Brilhac provides an alternative narrative for a certain France that is the France of freedom, independence, and determination, to place alongside the many recent studies of the dark years of collaboration under Vichy. *La France libre* is a history of the match sticks which de Gaulle was able to light among those who had formed the Free French and who joined with the internal resistance in a bonfire of celebration at the time that Paris was liberated.

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