H-Diplo Roundtables

Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945,* New York: Berghahn, 2005

Roundtable Editor: **William R. Keylor**, Boston University

Roundtable Participants:

Charles Cogan, Harvard University; **Jeremi Suri**, University of Wisconsin; **Irwin Wall**, Visiting Scholar, Center for European Studies, New York University; University of California, Riverside

H-Diplo Roundtable Editor: **Diane Labrosse**, Concordia University; National Security Archive H-Diplo Fellow

---

Review by Charles Cogan
Harvard University

Abcès de Fixation [1]

This fine, important, and deeply researched book constitutes a bit of an eye-opener. One always knew that the wartime relationship between the Free French movement and the Roosevelt Administration was not a happy one. But New Caledonia was not just a microcosmic reflection of the larger relationship between French Gaullists and Americans. In the particular environment of New Caledonia, that relationship can best be generalized as execrable.

There were a number of reasons behind this *abcès de fixation* that was New Caledonia, not the least of which was that Charles de Gaulle was very far away and indeed never got into the Pacific theater during the war. So far away, indeed, was New Caledonia that it was easier to break away from the grasp of Vichy, and this it did, early on, in the late summer of 1940. This act was carried off with remarkable ease, partly because of the island's proximity to Australia. De Gaulle appointed Henri Sautot, the resident in New Hebrides, who had rallied to the Free French cause, to go to New Caledonia and accomplish the same. This Sautot did, arriving in Nouméa harbor aboard an Australian cruiser whose astute commander, Henry Showers, helped to effect the transition without bloodshed.

In New Caledonia, as in some other parts of the French Empire, there had been a general feeling of uneasiness at what the new regime in Paris had done, with the armistice of June 22, 1940. The farther away one was from the Metropole, as in sub-Saharan Africa and particularly in New Caledonia, the more one could feel free to express this uneasiness.

Yet, in a dialectical sense, there was at the same time a feeling of loneliness, isolation and even victimhood among the Gaullist sympathizers and officials in New Caledonia, fearful as they were of being ousted by French forces coming from Indochina, which had remained under the

sway of Vichy, and, later during the war, fearful of an American takeover of the island, which had some basis in fact and was not simply a manifestation of French paranoia and conspiracy theories.

In truth, at the moment of the defeat and the armistice in June 1940, very few in the French military or civilian hierarchy were prepared to risk their lives and careers for a lonely cause headed by a temporary brigadier. The tradition of the longevity and ponderousness of the French state, an apparatus that had carried on inexorably through several centuries despite the many political changes, was such that the government bureaucracy continued on virtually seamlessly as the new Vichy regime took power in the summer of 1940.

Still, there were a few who, hearing de Gaulle's appeals from London, rallied spontaneously to his cause. But the underlying problem was that de Gaulle, though his idea was splendid – to preserve the honor of France in the midst of the worst defeat in its history – he was unable to attract many followers to his side, and thus he had to work with the human material at hand. It is true that there were some brilliant exceptions – Maurice Schumann, General Leclerc, General Catroux, and others, but by and large the General was not always well served by his representatives. In the United States, there was a hydra-headed representation of second-rank personalities (with the exception of René Pleven, who led an early special mission to Washington). One of these representatives, Adrien Tixier, taken on by de Gaulle because of his credentials with the French trade unions, occasionally bad-mouthed the General in front of American officials.

There was also observable, due to the fact that the de Gaulle movement was so new and so fragile, a certain amount of infighting in centers of Free French activity, whether in London, in Algiers, in Washington, or in other, far-flung places such as Nouméa. One New Caledonian in particular, Michel Vergès, sought to sow discord whenever he could, bad-mouthing one Free French governor after another, claiming he was the only true Gaullist leader on the island, and attacking the American presence by mouth and by pen, until finally he was publicly denounced by the last wartime governor of the island, Jacques Tallec.

To make matters worse for the Gaullist image, particularly in the United States, there were respected French figures, in particular Alexis Leger and Jean Monnet, who enjoyed sinecures in wartime Washington, and who managed to impress upon their influential American interlocutors that de Gaulle was not a democrat and therefore was unsuited to take over a postwar French Government. Many in the Roosevelt Administration came to regard de Gaulle as a proto-Fascist. And it is well to remember that Fascism – not Communism – was the international bugaboo during the period of the 1930's and World War II.

In New Caledonia, de Gaulle appointed a series of often inferior or misguided officials – a parallel, one might say, to the Gaullist representation in the United States and elsewhere. In New Caledonia the key figure throughout most of the war was Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, who had served with distinction in the French Navy in World War I. A member of the petty nobility, d'Argenlieu, like many of his social class, had gone into the Navy. (The French Navy became known as "La Royale," literally because its Headquarters is located on the rue Royale in Paris, but by extension because it had a royalist (and, one might add, an anti-British) tinge).

In the inter-war period d'Argenlieu had retired and entered the Church. He assumed the name of Father Louis de la Trinité and later became a provincial superior in the Carmelite order (p. 74). When he returned to service with the defeat of 1940, he proved to be dogmatic and authoritarian, characteristics he would exhibit not only in New Caledonia but later in the ambiguous division of authority between himself and General Leclerc in the Free French return to Indochina in 1945.

In New Caledonia, d'Argenlieu set out to get rid of the popular, though not wholly effective, governor, Sautot, provoking riots on the island in May 1942, in the midst of the war with Japan. Thereafter, d'Argenlieu, while retaining his role as French High Commissioner for the Pacific area, moved his Headquarters to Tahiti.

The original settlement in New Caledonia had been based in part on deportees from the revolt of the Paris Commune in 1871. The French settlers ruled over a downtrodden native Polynesian population ("Kanaks") and a less numerous grouping of other Asian nationalities. Into this cauldron, in early 1942, streamed American troops with a mission of setting up a base of operations in the desperate effort to hold back the Japanese advance into the Solomon Islands. Later in 1942, the headquarters of the commander of the Allied forces in the South Pacific was moved from Auckland to Nouméa, and thousands more American troops arrived.

The American approach, pragmatic and utilitarian, was to get on with the war effort and to sweep aside anything that got in the way. For the vastly outnumbered Free French, the sovereignty of the Metropole over the island had to be preserved, in form as well as substance. Generally speaking, American officials, in New Caledonia and elsewhere, failed to appreciate fully the terrible affront to French sovereignty represented by the fact that France had become the only major Western democracy in modern times to have been overrun and occupied by a foreign power. For their part, American officials were taken aback by what they saw as French pettifoggery, some even attributing it to a clinical condition: paranoia. One American officer wrote: "Unlike the straightforward colonials, some of the metropolitan Fighting French – particularly those in the highest positions – have been so touchy, so arrogant, so nearly impossible to get along with, that their behavior can hardly be described except in psychiatric terms." (p. 110).

These differences of approach led to numerous disagreements in New Caledonia, over housing for the Americans, over the American hiring of Kanaks, most of whom had been living on reservations, and over many other issues. These disputes were particularly intense during the period when Admiral "Bull" Halsey was in charge of American forces on the island. Halsey arrived in Nouméa in October 1942 as commander of Allied forces in the South Pacific. To be sure, the intent of the author, in this very thorough and flawlessly grounded account, is to put a magnifying glass on the main Free French officials on the island. Yet the result is that the reader gets the impression that the French, more than the Americans, were the main ones who raised the problems in these disputes.

The author rightly points out that part of the difficulty was one of political culture: decentralized American decision-making vis-à-vis the Free French having to await orders from London, and later Algiers. This was not merely due to de Gaulle's authoritarian personality ("this too-military

style," as André Fontaine once put it), but also to the hierarchical and pyramidal nature of the French state as it has functioned over the centuries. "The state acts as one man" is the mantra in France's centralized political culture.

Later in the war, as the threat to the Solomons had been removed, Nouméa became less important as a base, and the American presence was gradually reduced. At the same time, however, a new threat arose for French interests: the possible cession of New Caledonia to the United States. In 1943, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia led a team of senators on a round-the-world tour, and when he came back to Washington he proposed that New Caledonia be transferred to the U.S., in return for canceling French debts still due from World War I and for the Lend-Lease granted during World War II. (p. 165). At around the same time, a Joint Chiefs of Staff report, conducted by the general board of the Navy, proposed the elimination of France as a Pacific power, since its island possessions "lie detached from other French interests and responsibilities." These islands, the report recommended, should be transferred from French to American control. (p. 186).

Despite the fact that commitments had been made by the U.S. to restore the French Empire intact after the war – by Roosevelt to Marshal Pétain and by the State Department to Pleven (p. 173-74), the President, as the war progressed, came up with the idea that key points in the Empire – Dakar, Nouméa, Indochina, Bizerte – be placed under a trusteeship system to assure defense of these strong points and to prepare for their eventual decolonization. (p. 175). Such a proposal not only alarmed the French; it astonished officials at the British Foreign Office (p. 175), and it disturbed the Australians and New Zealanders. (p. 187).

On April 12, 1945 came the death of Roosevelt and with it the end of the attempt to hive off parts of the French Empire. At the United Nations conference in San Francisco (April-June 1945), a majority of the U.S. delegates came to the conclusion that the U.S. could not afford to alienate either France or Great Britain over colonial issues. At the same time, State Department memoranda concluded that French administration in the Empire had not been as harmful as President Roosevelt had believed. (p. 218). Under President Truman, the State Department, in the hands of internationalists such as Joseph Grew and Dean Acheson, became once again a major player in determining U.S. policy toward France, such as not had been the case under the personal rule of Franklin Roosevelt. And with the almost immediate emergence of the Soviet threat, the importance of France – politically, geographically and demographically – became once again manifest in Washington.

Notes:

[1] "Focal point for grievances." (*Harper Collins Robert*, fifth edition, 1998).