



The Fall and Rise of French Sea Power: France's Quest for an Independent Naval Policy, 1940–1963 by Hugues Canuel.

Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 344. ISBN 978–1–6824–7616–1.

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Geography has always offered France both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Its Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines provided bases to support a colonial empire and project naval power worldwide. At the same time, the need to protect its land frontiers to the north and northeast absorbed resources that might have made it a maritime power. The disastrous defeat of 1940 and ensuing scuttling of the French Navy at Toulon in 1942 exacerbated the competition between naval and land forces and divided French armed forces into bitter political factions. Though the United States and United Kingdom helped rebuild the French Navy during and after World War II, that assistance was accompanied by sharp disagreements with the French notion of that navy's structure and missions. French reliance on foreign naval aid compelled repeated changes in the design and capabilities of the resulting force.

In *The Fall and Rise of French Sea Power*,¹ Hughes Canuel, a former naval officer of the Canadian Armed Forces, offers a sophisticated study of national security in the mid-twentieth century; he traces the evolution of the French Navy from a shattered, defeated force into a blue water navy that also contributed to Charles de Gaulle's strike force for nuclear deterrence. That transformation was neither easy nor linear. Both the exiled Free French navy and its post-1945 successor were dependent on American and British aid in the form of shipyards to update French ships, funding to finance French naval construction and operations, and even complete vessels and aircraft transferred to French control. During both World War II and the Cold War, this aid focused on smaller vessels meant to share tasks like anti-submarine warfare.

By contrast, the French Navy wanted the prestige and power projection of updated battleships and carrier battlegroups. Though French political leaders were more sympathetic to such ambitions than were the British and American governments, the pressing demands of defense against the Soviet threat repeatedly sacrificed naval budgets and capabilities to the needs of the French Army and Air Force. Naval aviator Henri Nomy, head of naval staff during most of the 1950s, sought legislative backing for a sustained effort to build a modern navy. But inadequate resources and the unstable politics of the Fourth Republic hampered his efforts to ensure continuity in planning and construction.

The prolonged counter-insurgencies in Indochina and Algeria diverted naval as well as military resources away from improving national defense. Though the Korean War prompted the United States to resource the French struggle in Southeast Asia as part of a broader containment strategy, there were never enough funds or construction capabilities to realize the blue-water vision of the Navy Ministry. By the late 1960s, the French felt compelled to decommission and scrap their last two battleships. As Canuel retells it, France was lucky to secure two of the three carrier

1. Orig., diss., Royal Military College of Canada (2018).

battle groups it desired. For decades, this naval airpower was possible only because of surplus British and American escort carriers launching US-produced aircraft:

On the one hand, the fractured history of the Marine nationale after the [1940] armistice—a navy at war with itself, its allies, and its government—can be derided as a succession of broken dreams, misplaced ambitions, betrayals by perfidious partners overseas and an ungrateful nation at home. None of the commanders ... ever achieved the elaborate visions outlined through the years. On the other hand, hindsight shows their remarkable ability to shape the compromises forced on them by allied military leaders and national political figures through the fall and rise of French sea power during these years. Securing such “least bad” arrangements allowed successive ministers and admirals to rebuild the fleet and the Aéronavale [naval aviation] with a rare singularity of purpose. (253)

Charles de Gaulle looms large in the history of the French Navy, as in most aspects of twentieth-century France. While the Navy Ministry had pursued the technology of nuclear propulsion during the 1950s, only de Gaulle’s decision to create his own nuclear strike force provided the resources needed to produce ballistic missiles and nuclear-propelled submarines. In effect, however, de Gaulle chose nuclear deterrence over the expeditionary forces needed to guarantee France’s ongoing role as a world power.

A compelling story in its own right, Hugues Canuel’s new book is a lucid and persuasive case study in maritime power, offering a rare analysis of key national security issues of France in the mid-twentieth century.