

## Introduction

On the River Seine, on a cold December day in 1947, dark waters lapped against barges anchored into a blockade against the passage of coal and other supplies from the north to the south of France. The normally bustling Central Market in Paris lay idle, empty carts lining the street like skeletons stripped of their verdant produce and local goods. On the Avenue de Clichy, near where Parisian volunteers under Marechal Bon-Adrien Jeannot de Moncey had held back advancing Russian armies in 1814, it was quiet but for the shuffling feet of the bundled hundreds waiting in a bread line, trying to keep warm against a bitter north wind. Now, helmeted National Guardsmen patrolled the freight yards nearby, deserted since the rail workers had gone on strike. Outside of Paris, strikes directed by the communist-led trade union paralyzed every major industrial center. Violence had erupted in the coalfields north of Paris and the southern port of Marseille, belying the uneasy calm elsewhere. Rumors circulated that the strikes – and the violence – were directed from abroad. It is unlikely that, preoccupied by their own concerns, the beleaguered Parisians in the bread line that December day stopped at de Moncey’s memorial, but they too must have wondered if the Russians were again on the march. At the very least, they might have pondered how, less than three years after the end of the Second World War, France seemed poised for the second catastrophic collapse in a decade.

From Paris, *New York Times* Paris Bureau Chief Harold Callender portrayed dark images of the strikes for American readers: “France has become in the last few weeks a storm center of the Western World.” The Soviet Union, he said, seemed determined to carry out a “gigantic test of mobilization of the indigenous forces at its disposal – a dress rehearsal for

some ambitious potential project which some describe as that of an internal political revolution and others describe as that of transforming these two Western countries into Soviet satellites.”<sup>1</sup> US officials also viewed the situation with alarm and sought to push through an interim aid package to bolster the French government.<sup>2</sup> Secretary of State George Marshall wrote members of Congress that there was a serious risk they would lose France without it, for the communist-inspired agitation was a “flagrant attempt to seize power.”<sup>3</sup> Another senior official noted that a communist Europe, run by the “graduates of Moscow’s Comintern,” would bring about a “tight alliance” between the Soviet Union and Europe, an alliance “far more powerful than any seen on earth before,” encompassing 330 million Europeans and 200 million Soviets, bound together by hostility to the United States.<sup>4</sup> Disturbed by the paralysis gripping both France and Italy, President Harry Truman told administration and Congressional leaders assembled at the White House that month that the United States faced “the greatest challenge to its security in its history, even including the two world wars.”<sup>5</sup>

Not long after, journalists Joseph and Stewart Alsop detailed White House thinking in their *Saturday Evening Post* exposé, “If Russia Grabs Europe,” noting the heightened alarm evident in the demeanor of Truman and his senior experts. The two brothers, who were close to Truman and administration officials, wondered “What could have driven the mild-mannered, cheerful, unimaginative man from Missouri to this dark conclusion?” The answer, they claimed, lay within the intelligence reports that crossed Truman’s desk every morning: he was “inescapably and daily confronted with the facts.”<sup>6</sup>

Though the Alsops recognized the influence of intelligence at the time, there has been no analysis of its effect on American perceptions of France in histories of Franco-American relations, nor an appreciation of its role in American foreign policy during the uncertain and dangerous period from the months before Liberation in 1944 until the culmination of the French strikes – the height of Cold War tension in France – in late 1947. *Contesting France* is the first study of Franco-American relations to offer comprehensive examination of the US intelligence that shaped American perceptions of France in the early Cold War. By internationalizing intelligence – situating it within a broader international and transimperial context that decenters Washington and accounts for French and colonized, official and non-state actors operating in France and its empire – this book demonstrates how French and American images of the French Communist Party (PCF) as anti-American, foreign, and bent on revolution developed and took flight before

the end of the Second World War, fed by a constant stream of warnings by French factions who used their contacts with American diplomats and intelligence experts to influence American foreign policy to suit their needs. For a time, this intelligence was deeply contested by US intelligence officers and diplomats depending on their vantage point, and it fed competing visions about France and its empire. Ultimately, though, intelligence that suggested that France was on the verge of collapse prevailed, and it lent urgency to the situation by stoking fear and a sense of foreboding. Above all, *Contesting France* shows that the images conjured by the reports that flowed across Truman's desk profoundly influenced American analysis and all but dictated US responses to the crisis.

#### OLD FEUDS

It did not take long after the end of the Second World War for Americans to forget Soviet contributions to the war and to ignore the utter devastation visited upon Europe during six years of total war. And while the degree of carnage and material destruction varied, “common to all European experiences and memories was the cost of war in lives lost, families torn apart, hopes crushed, morality tarnished, politics discredited, economies devastated, and economies destabilized.”<sup>7</sup> The beginning of the Cold War in Europe played out most visibly in places like France, Italy and Greece, where the general transition from war to peace between 1944 and 1947 overlaid pseudo or real civil wars, which pitted communist resisters against former regimes and collaborators. Tony Judt once noted the immense impact of these European civil wars; indeed, their very nature meant that war in Europe was not over in 1945 with the defeat of the Nazis. “It is one of the most traumatic features of civil war,” he wrote, “that even after the enemy is defeated, he remains in place and with him memory of the conflict.”<sup>8</sup> Internecine battles between factions only eroded the legitimacy and authority of the governments, which projected weakness and instability to American officials observing from abroad. Those same officials were especially alarmed by communist-led efforts to transform the Second World War into a “social revolution.”<sup>9</sup> In France and Italy, the communist parties earned their best showings with 28.6 and 19 percent of the vote in postwar elections, buoyed by their participation in the anti-Nazi Resistance and Marxism's appeal to masses left hungry and destitute by the war. At the same time, the violence that had characterized the war continued in these partisan struggles and, in France's case, extended into its colonies and overseas

territories. Thus, the Cold War emerged not as a discrete break with the past, but as a continuation of wartime score-settling and a new phase in European democracies' struggle against communism.<sup>10</sup>

The effects of this violence and the legitimacy vacuum the war created were especially profound in France, as various factions jockeyed for power in the Liberation and immediate postwar eras. After the war, members of the PCF enjoyed new strength and influence due to their prominent role in the Resistance. For a time, they supported General Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French and the French Committee of National Liberation (CFLN) in Algiers. Other groups on the far right, military elements loyal to de Gaulle's rival General Henri Giraud, prewar political figures, and a vocal émigré community in the United States all opposed de Gaulle, arguing that he would be a complicit partner in communist attempts to seize power or foment revolution after Liberation. Eventually de Gaulle consolidated his power within a provisional government, which welcomed PCF officials for the first time in history. Fragile and uncomfortable, this temporary alliance between the general and the communists soon soured.

Convinced the PCF was maneuvering for his ouster, de Gaulle resigned in January 1946, leaving a series of coalition governments to inaugurate the Fourth Republic on the most inauspicious of terms. By the end of the year, the PCF had become the strongest and largest political party in France. Observers in France and abroad feared that the communists, acting on orders from Moscow, would sabotage other parties, paving the way for authoritarian rule. With growing tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, and growing anti-communism in the West, de Gaulle reemerged at the head of an anti-communist movement in the spring of 1947. The Socialist-led government finally broke with the PCF, expelling them from the ruling coalition in May. As the communists moved into opposition, many feared they would launch an all-out assault on the government. American leaders, acutely aware that their plans for European recovery hinged on events in France and Italy, announced the Marshall Plan that summer.

The autumn before the strikes, Soviet and Yugoslav officials, in the first meeting of the new Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), reprimanded the PCF and its Italian counterpart, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), for opportunist policies and parliamentary tactics since Liberation. Not long after, the PCF stoked social unrest and encouraged strikes to force their reentry into the government. By December, strikes had broken out across the nation in key industries, including the railroads and mines;

at their apex, nearly three million workers stayed home. The unusual violence of the strikes and the creation of ad hoc worker committees resembling “soviets” led many to fear that a communist insurrection was underway.

Alarmed by the deteriorating situation and perceived French incapacity, American officials did much more than offer financial assistance to prop up France’s economy during the crisis years from Liberation to the French strikes in December 1947. They engaged directly in French internal affairs to bolster noncommunist groups, weaken the PCF, and break the communist Confédération Générale du Travail’s (CGT) hold over labor. They encouraged an anti-Soviet foreign policy orientation and pressured French leaders to align with American interests in an emergent Cold War. Against American anti-imperial discourse, US officials also came to support and assist French retention of its overseas empire. The American belief that France was a vital but weak ally imperiled by an insidious communist threat persisted well beyond the immediate postwar period. So too did American intervention in French affairs. Those perceptions and images, and indeed the high emotions aroused by the French crisis, shaped Franco-American relations for the rest of the century.

*Contesting France* examines the genesis of American perceptions of France through analytic focus on the intelligence that the Alsops argued had driven US responses to the crisis in France that unfolded in 1944 and climaxed at the end of 1947. In doing so, this book makes three interlocking arguments. First, while Truman understood the situation to be dire, he may not have appreciated the provenance and nature of the reports on his desk. Despite the appearance of consensus and the persistence of an alarmist narrative that held that France was weak, anti-American, and on the verge of a communist revolution, the reality was more complex. In fact, the intelligence was deeply contested by US intelligence officers. Second, a vast transnational – at times transimperial – web of factions and sources in America, France, and the outposts of empire quietly passed information to their contacts in US intelligence and diplomatic circles and influenced US policy in important, yet unrecognized ways. That intelligence embodied those sources’ aspirations and fears, and sometimes, their bald financial ambitions. Conservative French factions, in particular, successfully used intelligence to play up the communist threat and focus American attention. Third, *Contesting France* contends that the intelligence pointing to an imminent and existential communist threat was often overblown, part of campaign to encourage intervention in the affairs of America’s oldest ally.

## CONTESTING INTELLIGENCE

Historians have long assumed that US officials were largely united in their perception of postwar France as weak and lurching toward revolution. *Contesting France* reveals that US intelligence officials were often bitterly divided in their assessments of France and the threat posed by communism. There was some ideological fluidity within American officialdom on French affairs, but there were core beliefs that coalesced into two camps. While US military intelligence, the Central Intelligence Group, and US embassy officials in Paris viewed France as weak, unreliable, and wreathed in communist intrigue, officials in the wartime Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor organizations in the State Department pointed to France's resilience and initiative. This book argues that these differences were often a reflection of the distinctive intelligence cultures of the organizations and the personal pedigrees and experiences of their analysts. To borrow from Barbara Rosenwein, their effects created an "emotional community" of like-minded officials who perceived France through a similar lens.<sup>11</sup> OSS analysts tended to be less dogmatic than military intelligence officers and State Department officials, the product of their academic training, diverse viewpoints, and their intimate knowledge of France and its empire. Many of them shared Franklin Roosevelt's liberal outlook, including his anti-colonial sentiment and willingness to work with communists, and but they did not share his antipathy for de Gaulle or sense that France was finished as a great power. By contrast, military intelligence and State Department officials in Washington and embassy analysts in Paris were more conservative and reflexively anti-communist in their outlook. Unlike pro-Gaullist OSS "liberals," these "conservatives," for a time, saw de Gaulle as illegitimate and France as weak, beset by a communist peril. Over time, however, as the Cold War deepened, conservatives came to view de Gaulle as a potential anti-communist partner and French strength – bolstered by restoration of its empire – as a necessary precondition for its critical role as an anti-Soviet bulwark. Not surprisingly, the views of these liberal Gaullist and conservative anti-Gaullist factions of US officials dovetailed with likeminded factions in metropolitan and overseas France with whom they were in contact. Yet there were also significant divergences within the same organizations that sometimes made for contradictory assessments. State Department officials posted in French colonies, for example, often viewed communist-inspired liberation movements there with less suspicion than their counterparts in Paris and Washington, DC. Even within the nascent Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA), there was some evidence of a divide over the nature and degree of the communist threat in France.

The competition among American intelligence organizations and State Department officials in the United States, France, and in France's overseas empire underscores the fact that both intelligence and policymaking at the end of the Second World War and early postwar period were often improvised, the product of changing presidential administrations in Washington, DC, a gap in American intelligence structures between the war and the postwar, and ever-shifting dynamics in France and its empire. This instability helps to explain, as Richard Immerman once asked, how intelligence often shaped American perceptions [of France] and why, at other times, it failed to have an effect.<sup>12</sup> For a time, this tension likely moderated US policy. Yet the alarmist narratives cultivated by US military intelligence and embassy officials ultimately emerged victorious in these intra-agency battles in the immediate postwar era.

This study traces, how, in the end, US officials minimized early differences and dissenting views. With the OSS's disbandment, the marginalization of the State Department's nascent intelligence bureau, and the apparent preference for military intelligence in the new Truman administration after the war, analysis emanating from the embassy in Paris and the US military quickly coalesced around a conservative, anti-communist Cold War consensus. Instead of offering alternative scenarios and nuanced appraisals of the complex situation in postwar France, this analysis stoked the administration's worst fears about France and legitimized hardline US policy. It also foreclosed the possibility of splitting the PCF from the Soviet Union before the party's hardline turn in 1947 and garnering communist support for a peaceful, gradual devolution of power in France's empire. While one narrative ultimately prevailed, the fact that there were bitter lines drawn over the nature of the threat shows that there was nothing inevitable about the course of Franco-American relations in the immediate postwar era.

#### CONTESTING FACTIONS

While these disputes could be partially explained by the worldviews and experience of US intelligence officers and diplomats, this book argues that the intelligence that made its way to Truman's desk was profoundly influenced by a transnational and transimperial web of informants, who also contested narratives about France. These informants were not a monolithic group but instead represented various factions<sup>13</sup> along the

political and ideological spectrum, within and outside of the public space, state and nonstate actors, as well as foreign nationals and other groups with vested interests. These sources gathered, sometimes invented, and often distorted intelligence on the role and activities of communists in metropolitan and overseas France. In many cases, the intelligence was tailored to grab American attention and reflected the political aims of the source.

During the war, the State Department and military intelligence's French sources came almost entirely from among well-placed ex-Vichyites, conservative military and industrial circles, colonial authorities, anti-communist groups and former politicians clamoring for a role in liberated France; many were émigrés living in the United States. To their American interlocutors, these high-level informants represented tradition and a bulwark against radical change, and their claim to speak for France lent credibility to administration policies. One Resistance official wryly referred to this anti-communist, anti-Gaullist grouping as "les américains" for their close alignment with the United States.<sup>14</sup> These sources expressed genuine concern about communist influence, and their repeated references to the horrors of the Paris Commune and the Terror of 1793 reflected the real trauma that those events engendered for many French. They were, however, also astute observers of American politics, and they realized that on this point – fear of Bolshevism – they enjoyed common ground with their contacts in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. They thus played up French weakness, disunity, and the communist menace to convince the US to intervene in France, a move that they hoped would protect their own economic and political interests. They also supported French control over the empire in order to strengthen metropolitan France – especially in the event of another war – and cast national liberation movements as components of an international communist conspiracy. Over time, these conservative factions played an important role in persuading their American counterparts, against their anti-imperial instincts, to side with colonizers.

By contrast, the French sources of OSS and a successor agency in the State Department, the Interim Research and Intelligence Service (IRIS)<sup>15</sup> often emerged from Resistance circles – including Gaullist and communist elements – and from local contacts with colonized populations. In Resistance circles, this loose grouping was referred to as "les nationaux,"<sup>16</sup> those who belonged to Free France and attached great significance to the preservation of French sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> They were also united by a focus on defeating Germany and the recognition that the prewar status quo was untenable. These French sources challenged the claims of



“les américains” and presented an alternative vision of France that came to dominate OSS analysis. To OSS experts, the value of these sources lay in their position in the heart of Resistant France, upon which Americans would rely for support and intelligence in an invasion. Instead of a hostile and apathetic nation on the verge of revolution, “les nationaux” suggested that France was a sturdy, worthy ally for the United States; they also warned against any foreign intervention in French domestic affairs. While not united by political ideology, many in this grouping understood the popularity of communism and questioned the continued viability of France’s *mission civilisatrice* overseas.

After the war, these factions further organized along Cold War lines. No longer was it a question of nationalism or alignment with the United States; it was a question of East and West. By 1946, right-wing and conservative factions, Gaullists, and elements of the non-communist left coalesced under an anti-communist banner, opposed to communists in the PCF. It seems, perhaps, that US ambassador to France Jefferson Caffery had been correct; in the Cold War, “il faut choisir.”

In unearthing the activity of these myriad actors, this book builds upon recent efforts to emphasize French agency and contributions to the development of the Cold War and French influence on US policy.<sup>18</sup> William Hitchcock and Michael Creswell have shown how the French were able to compensate for the power imbalance with the United States through careful diplomacy and manipulation of American strategic goals. They challenged Geir Lundestad’s notion of “empire by invitation,”<sup>19</sup> but moved beyond simple resistance; these historians suggest that French leaders “finally succeeded in altering the structure of international relations in order to defend their interests more effectively.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, *Contesting France* argues that webs of informants shaped US perceptions of the situation in France, and, in doing so, displayed initiative and created remarkable room for maneuver even as France became more dependent on the United States. Even as some US officials seemed determined to retire from the continent after the end of the Second World War, French factions – in touch with US intelligence – played an important role in refocusing American attention toward Europe and, later, the Global South. These actors thus played a crucial role in constructing the contours of American empire and the postwar global order.

Further, by raising the critical role of French factions level with national diplomatic apparatuses, this account shows how the French desire to show strength (as oft-noted by US officials) was not just about prestige as Alessandro Brogi has suggested, but about outmaneuvering

political rivals and establishing legitimacy in a France where the leadership and soul of the nation appeared to be up for grabs.<sup>21</sup> The exchanges between these factions and their American interlocutors, whether a formal discussion or a whispered aside, were diplomatic acts. They were also sources of power and influence that have been overlooked in accounts that focus on foreign ministries as the sole locus of diplomacy. From the bottom up, these everyday exchanges created the substructures upon which formal (and official) Franco-American relations rested.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, *Contesting France* underscores the agency of the colonized and those factions who argued against French restoration, and whose voices, for a time, echoed in the reporting of the OSS, intelligence officers in the State Department, and other US officials on the ground. As Jeffrey James Byrne points out in his important study on Algeria's Cold War, these actors understood that they could leverage Cold War competition to draw in the superpowers to their own advantage.<sup>23</sup>

#### CONTESTING COMMUNISM

That one narrative prevailed had consequences for Franco-American relations that cannot be fully appreciated without consideration of the intelligence behind it. The intelligence on Truman's desk conjured images of impending French collapse and revolution, but, as this book argues, it was overblown, the product of the misjudgments of embassy and intelligence analysts and the political agendas of their sources who played up the communist threat to encourage American intervention in French affairs. These assessments often rested on a flimsy evidentiary basis, and too often had to be adjusted when their worst predictions failed to materialize. This was a problem that increasingly disturbed mid-level analysts in the State Department and CIA even if, from above, these doubts failed to sway their leaders.

Taking its cue from Maxwell Aderath, Jacques Fauvet, and Irwin Wall, *Contesting France* argues that the PCF in this period was, as Wall put it "first, foremost, and most fundamentally French" rather than Soviet stooges. Likewise, it denies the charge inherent in the more recent work of Philippe Buton, Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, who argue that new sources reveal PCF intent to seize power, in two distinct periods: once during Liberation, and again in late 1945 to early 1946.<sup>24</sup> This account directly challenges this neo-orthodox view by showing how French officials perceived the threat posed by French communism – as an adept political rival rather than an existential threat – and how this often differed