

Observation no: 111

Country-year: France 1955

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No.

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

Yes. In 1799, General Napoleon Bonaparte came to power as the First Consul, effectively ending the French Revolution.¹ In 1851, Bonaparte's nephew, Louis Napoleon, dissolved the assembly of France's Second Republic and reclaimed power by military force.²

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No. The Prime Minister (PM) during and immediately preceding the Suez Crisis was Guy Mollet, who was in office from February 1, 1956 through June 13, 1957.³ Mollet was in the French army in 1939 later joined the resistance during World War Two but there is no evidence that he was an officer. He began his career political career in 1945.

Prior to Mollet, PM Edgar Faure was in office from February 23, 1955 through February 1, 1956.⁴ Faure was a member of the resistance during the German occupation of World War Two but he was not a military officer. He was a career politician and lawyer.

Prior to Mollet, PM Edgar Faure, who served from February 23, 1955 through February 1, 1956, was a career politician. His predecessor, PM Pierre Mendès France, who served from June 18, 1954 through February 23, 1955 was a lieutenant

¹ For more information, Robert Asprey, *The Rise Of Napoleon Bonaparte*, (NY, NY: Basic Books, 2000).

² *December 2, 1851: Contemporary Writing on the Coup d'Etat of Louis Napoleon*, ed. John B. Halsted, (Doubleday & Company Inc./Mass Market Paperback, 1972); Karl Marx. (1851-2). *The Eighteenth Brumaire Of Louis Bonaparte*. (Translated By D.D.L.) (e-book). (Montana): Kessinger Publishers, (2004).

³ For all dates of leadership, see Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, in *The Cambridge History of Modern France (Book 7)*, translated by Godfrey Rogers. (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴ Because the French became militarily involved in Suez in October 1956, it is only necessary to not go back beyond PM Faure, who was in power prior to October 1955.

in the French Air Force in WWII.⁵ That said, since France's involvement in the Suez Crisis began on October 31, 1956, Mendès France was not technically the leader in the year prior to conflict initiation. Therefore the answer to this question is still "no."

President Rene Coty, who served from 1954 through January 1959, joined the army in World War I but not as an officer. In the 1920s he became a career politician. That said, the presidency in France was largely symbolic due to the parliamentary nature of France's political system until the Fifth Republic was inaugurated in 1958.⁶

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No.

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

No.

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

No.

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

No. That said, the French military underwent some ideological change in the wake of World War Two and the French experience in Indo-China. While the military of the Fourth Republic (beginning in 1944) was still characterized by pre-war ideological tensions between regime and the military, Bankwitz notes that "the officer corps in general had accepted the military attitudes which only a minority in it had openly expressed before 1940. Since the defeat, the officers had been forced to choose between honor and obedience, between nation and regime. Now, they publically embraced the idea of conditional obedience... they firmly believed there were 'cases in which rebellion is a duty.'"⁷ Defeat in 1940 was blamed upon politicians and the army put forth a vision of the regime that had led the nation astray from what

⁵ Walter Waggoner, "MENDES-FRANCE, WHO LEAD FRANCE OUT OF INDOCHINA, IS DEAD AT 75," *New York Times*, October 19, 1982, accessed December 4, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/19/obituaries/mendes-france-who-lead-france-out-of-indochina-is-dead-at-75.html> .

⁶ Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

⁷ Philip Charles Farwell Bankwitz, *Maxime Weygand and Civil-military Relations in Modern France*, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1967, pg. 362.

should have been a tightknit relationship with the military. Additionally, one of the central ideas to French civil-military relations at this time was the idea of the “nation-in-arms” and as the “army as a microcosm of the nation.”⁸

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

No.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

No.

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

No.

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

No.

It is important to note, however, that the *epuration legale* (“legal purge”) of French officials with links to the Nazis or other collaboration with the Vichy Government was conducted from 1944 through 1949.⁹ The litigation on many of these cases lasted for decades afterwards and involved some former senior military officers.

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

No.

The office of the president is technically the chief of the French Army, but this was a largely symbolic position in 1955. Very little information is available in English on

⁸ Ibid., 208.

⁹ For more information see, “Epuración legale: 400 000 dossier, moins de 800 morts,” *Historia* web magazine, accessed December 14, 2014 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20040910175241http://www.historia.presse.fr/data/ag/693/69306801.html>.

this subject. Given the history of French civil-military relations, it is likely that there were some kind of successor-institutions to the pre-War institutions such as the Superior Council of War and the Permanent Committee of National Defense, but that they, like their predecessors, met rarely and remained relatively important since the political upheavals of 1936.¹⁰

It is also noteworthy that French Army under De Gaulle in 1955 was considerably more vocal on questions of political life than in previous periods (see question 7). According to the law, various constitutions and legal interpretations of French law since Article 12 of the 1791 Constitution specified that the army was subordinate to civil power. That said, Bankwitz argues that this system was overturned in 1940, at which point the army began to informally wield political power by nature of the standards and requirements known as "*conditions morales*" it imposed on the regime, which effectively allowed them veto power over legislation.

¹⁰ Ibid., 84.