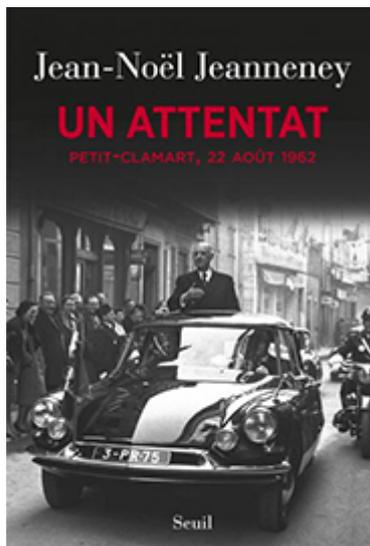


**Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Un Attentat. Petit-Clamart*,
 22 août 1962, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2016, 342 p.**

Andrew Knapp



The writer Frederick Forsyth, formerly Paris correspondent for *The Observer*, once recalled that the Paris press corps spent the summer of 1962 waiting for someone to take a shot at de Gaulle. They stopped waiting on the evening of 22 August. As the General's Citroën DS sped from the Élysée through the Paris suburb of Petit-Clamart on its way to Villacoublay aerodrome, a group of thirteen men led by the Air Force lieutenant-colonel Jean-Marie Bastien-Thiry opened fire on the presidential convoy. Over 150 spent cartridges were found on the scene. Eight bullets pierced the coachwork of the presidential car. Two more punctured a tyre each. But the convoy of two cars and two motorcycles drove through to Villacoublay, drivers and passengers unhurt. In Petit-Clamart, a TV and radio salesroom was sprayed with bullets; it had shut ten minutes before. So was the terrace of *Le Trianon* café –

on its weekly closing day. One bullet hit a Panhard travelling in the opposite direction to the president's car; a plastic splinter from the steering-wheel cut the thumb of its driver, Guy Fillon. In all, the attack caused three casualties, all indirect: the gendarmerie commander in charge of de Gaulle's security in the Haute-Marne, who suffered a stroke on hearing the news and died the next day; a major Niaux, wrongly rounded up as a suspect, who committed suicide in a police cell; and Bastien-Thiry himself, caught in September, tried with the other conspirators by a military court, and shot on 11 March 1963, de Gaulle having refused to commute the sentence.

Of some twenty attempts on de Gaulle's life, the Petit-Clamart remains the most celebrated. It forms the climax of works such as Jacques Delarue's *L'OAS contre de Gaulle*. At least three of the conspirators, released from prison under an amnesty in 1968, committed their reminiscences to paper (Alain de Bougrenet de La Tocnaye entitled his contribution *Comment je n'ai pas tué le général de Gaulle*). Gabriel Bastien-Thiry wrote a *plaidoyer* for his dead brother, who is the object of a significant hagiographical literature. General Alain de Boissieu, de Gaulle's son-in-law who was travelling with him, devoted part of his memoirs to the attack. At least three documentaries or docudramas have appeared on French television. The record of the trial is published. The newsreels of the period are available online thanks to the Institut national de l'audiovisuel. Forsyth's best-selling thriller of 1971, *The Day of the Jackal*, and the film of the same title, open with the attack at Petit-Clamart,

before passing into fiction. The bullet-riddled DS is preserved at the de Gaulle museum at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises (except, as Jeanneney points out, that it is not the real car but a replacement).

The reasons for this *engouement* are easily understood. The conspiracy came closer than any other to succeeding (*'Cette fois, c'était tangent!'* said de Gaulle). The trial gave a platform to the conspirators and brought into the open the perverted logic of *Algérie française* extremism that motivated them. The prospect of having his day in court was what led Bastien-Thiry to stay in France and await arrest rather than fleeing the country; the firing squad made a martyr of him. Meanwhile, de Gaulle used the attack as a perfect opportunity to undertake what amounted to a second foundation of the Fifth Republic: a (successful) referendum introducing the election of the president by direct universal suffrage, the dissolution of the National Assembly, and elections that returned a stable parliamentary majority for the first time in the history of any Republic.

Given the abundance of the existing literature, Jean-Noël Jeanneney, in what appears to be his fifty-first book, is hardly taking us into unknown territory. What does he offer that is new? First, a reasonably clear and concise account of the conspiracy, underpinned by thorough examination of the (recently-released) police files as well as a handful of interviews (for example, with the Fillon family). Second, a series of reflections arising from the attack: on the mentality of the protagonists, and the context in which they operated; on the ethics of their actions and on their punishment; and – here the author stressed a contemporary relevance – on the balance to be struck by liberal democracies faced by terrorists between freedom and security. Third, he uses a chapter of *politique-fiction* (what if the attack had succeeded?) to underline the importance of chance in history, *pace* the fans of *longue durée*.

Despite his readiness to evoke the catastrophes that would befall France if he were no longer president, de Gaulle was remarkably careless about staying alive. Physically courageous (as his battlefield record in two wars testifies), he was clearly less worried by the danger of assassination than by the prospect of senility *à la* Pétain or of an undignified death (*une attaque aux cabinets*). This made him the despair of his security men. His many presidential journeys inside and outside France always entailed *bains de foule*. Above all, he hated living in the Élysée, had no Paris flat, and therefore insisted on travelling back and forth to Colombey (250 km. away) at least once a week, either by road or, as on 22 August 1962, by car to Villacoublay, plane to the Saint-Dizier air force base, and car again to his one home. Often, again as on 22 August, his wife accompanied him. The conspirators liked to claim, with no proof, that members of the presidential staff kept them abreast of the General's movements. In reality such informers were quite unnecessary. All it took was a handful of observers at the Pont Alexandre-III or at Saint-Dizier; and the number of possible itineraries was quite limited. De Gaulle refused armour plating on his car and normally insisted on stopping at traffic lights. The cliché about 'more innocent times' sits ill with the period of the Algerian war, but de Gaulle was an easy and a predictable target. Nor were the French security services very well-informed, despite having infiltrated the Spanish branch of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), the right-wing terrorist movement founded to defend *Algérie française* and then to

avenge its loss. No-one knew about 'Operation Charlotte-Corday', Bastien-Thiry's conspiracy, until it happened.

Fortunately, the General's insouciance was more than balanced by the almost comical incompetence of Bastien-Thiry and his men. Despite his rank of lieutenant-colonel, Bastien-Thiry was really an engineer (indeed, a *polytechnicien*) in uniform, specializing in missiles. He had no combat experience and no idea of how to mount a military operation. His recruits, a mixture of army deserters, former legionnaires, and far-right activists plus three Hungarians refugees from the November 1956 rising, underwent no selection process. Some drifted away again, having learnt details of the plot; others joined at the last minute; the Hungarians had difficulty understanding orders in French. Bastien-Thiry gave no thought to forging a team out of this random and (inevitably) quarrelsome bunch; indeed, they received no weapons training beyond firing off a few rounds in a wood. The operation was also underfinanced, thanks to Bastien-Thiry's scruples about approaching the OAS or robbing banks; he preferred to spend his own, limited, funds. That meant he drove about in his own car and was unable to buy reliable weapons. One of the group obtained two serviceable submachine guns, but left them in his car boot, told no-one else of their location, and got himself arrested on 29 May.

The operational results were predictable. Lazlo Varga, driver of the Renault Estafette van where four conspirators were positioned, was busy urinating into a hedge when the presidential convoy arrived at 90 km per hour. The second vehicle, La Tocnaye's Citroën ID, nearly tipped another gunman, Georges Watin, out of its open door as it accelerated towards the target. Half the guns on the scene jammed as they were fired. Nor was the conspirators' ineptitude compensated by fanatical bravery. La Tocnaye could have rammed the General's DS, vastly increasing the chances of the operation's success but also of his own death; he preferred to let the target pass and drive after it. Bastien-Thiry's role on the spot was limited to waving a copy of *L'Aurore* at his fellow-conspirators to signal the convoy's arrival. In the gathering dusk (it was 8.08 pm; France did not adopt 'summer time' till 1976) he was barely seen.

The conspirators' ideas were as mediocre as their military qualities. Perhaps the most bizarre feature of the group was the Hungarians' belief that de Gaulle had planned to sell Algeria, and France, out to the Communists: one claimed that this had been agreed when de Gaulle met the future Marshal Tukhachevsky in a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1917. As for Bastien-Thiry himself, brought up by a Gaullist father but married into a Vichy family (his father-in-law was the former Vichy minister Georges Lamirand), the trigger appears to have been violent opposition to the choice of Mystère aircraft to deliver France's nascent *force de frappe* (instead, presumably, of his own missiles). This led him to pen a fierce anonymous article in the far-right magazine *Rivarol* and to gravitate into a milieu where anti-Semitism, fundamentalist Catholicism, anti-Communism, and a variety of conspiracy theories all thrived along with Vichyism, but where *Algérie française* was the main cause, and the OAS the main 'institution'. Jeanneney warns us not to dismiss the conspirators' ideas, if only because a significant proportion of the French still hold them; but this does not make them any the less contemptible. Nor does Jeanneney's investigation of the theological 'justifications' for what the conspirators saw as tyrannicide reveal anything worthy of respect. While they found (anonymous) fundamentalist priests to encourage them,

their invocation of Aquinas at the trial was based on distortion and misquotation, and they implicitly acknowledged the weakness of their case by stating that they sought, not to kill de Gaulle, but only to arrest him. Wholly incredible in the light of what happened on 22 August, this claim was also inconsistent with Bastien-Thiry's presentation of himself as a second Stauffenberg and de Gaulle a second Hitler, only worse.

Two chapters deal with potentially uncomfortable issues arising from the attack and its context. One is the right (and duty) of soldiers to disobey orders. Here, a long 'debate' (if that is the term), involving, for example, the military's passive attitude towards the *coup d'État* of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte and de Gaulle's own insubordination in 1940, was apparently closed by the new rules on military discipline set out in 1966. Under these, the subordination of soldiers to civilian authorities was the supreme rule except where ordered to commit illegal acts against the laws of war, or acts constituting crimes against the Constitution or state security or civil peace. In the half-century since they were drawn up, the rules have not been put to the test. The second issue is the use of special measures to defend the state against violent attack. Between 1961 and 1963 de Gaulle set up no fewer than three special courts. The Generals' Putsch of April 1961 led to the creation, under Article 16 of the Constitution, of a High Military Tribunal to try the officers involved. This was dissolved after it failed to pass a death sentence on the ringleader, Raoul Salan. For Bastien-Thiry, therefore, de Gaulle insisted on creating, by special *ordonnance*, (invalidated by the *Conseil d'État*, but then confirmed by law in January 1963) a Military Court of Justice, consisting of three (Gaullist) senior officers and two civilian judges given military rank for the purpose. In itself, the trial could hardly be considered unfair. The defendants were represented by a nineteen-man defence team that included the cream of France's extreme right-wing lawyers; their involvement in the conspiracy was never in doubt (and none alleged ill-treatment by the police); but they had ample time to justify their actions over a period of five weeks. Three death penalties were handed down, and de Gaulle commuted two of them. This was, of course, absolutely regal treatment compared to what any FLN suspect had to face from a French court (if, indeed, he or she had not been summarily executed before reaching one). Nevertheless, the independence of the judiciary was, to say the least, open to doubt when a court created by de Gaulle, who also appointed its members, should try the perpetrators of an assassination attempt on de Gaulle. The Military Court of Justice disappeared after the verdict, only to be replaced on a more permanent basis by a new State Security Court; this was abolished in 1981 by François Mitterrand, a leading parliamentary opponent of both.

What if the conspiracy had succeeded, as it might easily have done? Jeanneney opens his counterfactual chapter, the most entertaining in the book, with a ghastly image of '*madame de Gaulle ensanglantée penchée comme une madone stupéfaite sur le général de Gaulle immobilisé par une mort tombée comme la foudre.*' What follows is shot through with dark irony. With the Algerian crisis over, the college of notables which would elect de Gaulle's successor under the constitution of 1958 (no question of a constitutional reform now) would naturally prefer the safe option: not Michel Debré, the *pur et dur* loyalist who had only left the Premiership at de Gaulle's behest

on 14 April, but the conservative former Prime Minister Antoine Pinay, who would go on to win the second ballot by 62 per cent. Pinay would appoint Edgar Faure, as Prime Minister, proportional representation would be restored, and along with it the uses, customs, and instability of the Fourth Republic. France would return to its Atlanticist loyalties. As Prime Minister, from 1983, Mitterrand would restore military rank and pension to a Bastien-Thiry who had been tried by a civil court and released from prison after three years. If the last point is hard to credit, Jeanneney's serious argument, of course, is that one or two luckier shots would have radically changed the course of French history.

Writing in the aftermath of the November 2015 attacks, Jeanneney is also keen to establish parallels between 1962 and the present, especially in terms of the religious motivations of the attackers and the delicate balance between civil liberties and security. This is perhaps the least developed and least convincing aspect of an otherwise excellent book. Fundamentalist Catholicism, however crucial to the mindsets of Bastien-Thiry and La Tocnaye, appears less of a central motivation for the conspiracy (as fundamentalist Islam is for today's jihadis), than as an *ex post facto* justification. And while Bastien-Thiry and his friends had few scruples about turning either Yvonne de Gaulle or bystanders into collateral damage, they had no desire either to maximise the death toll indiscriminately or to die in the act. In short, the challenge they presented was far less intractable than that posed by jihadis, and called for different remedies. Misguided, wicked, and dangerous though the conspirators of the Petit-Clamart were, one cannot but feel a degree of nostalgia for a moment when the worst France had to fear was this tiny band of incompetents.