

French armed forces chief of staff resigns in protest over military budget cuts

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General Pierre de Villiers, the chief of staff of the French armed forces, resigned yesterday after a week-long public conflict with President Emmanuel Macron over the defence budget. De Villiers issued a communiqué stressing his “reservations” about planned military budget cuts and attacking Macron’s policies as a threat to national security.

“In the current circumstances,” he wrote, “I believe I can no longer preserve the type of army which I believe is necessary to guarantee the protection of France and the French people, and to support the ambitions of our country. Consequently, I have drawn the conclusions that were imposed on me and presented, today, my resignation to the president of the Republic, who accepted it.”

De Villiers’s resignation is without precedent outside times of war. The last time France’s top officer resigned was in 1961, at the height of the Algerian war crisis, when General Jean Olié stepped down after the attempted April 21, 1961, coup d’état in Algiers led by officers opposed to Algerian independence and to the government in Paris.

This breakdown in Macron’s relationship with the army is all the more remarkable in that Macron has aggressively courted the military. During the presidential election campaign, he discussed restoring the draft and pledged an almost 50 percent increase in defence spending, to 2 percent of France’s gross domestic product (GDP), by 2025. When, on July 11, Public Accounts Minister Gérard Darmanin announced a temporary, one-year defence budget cut of €850 million, however, de Villiers led a public revolt against the move.

De Villiers appeared the next day at a meeting of the National Assembly’s defence committee attended by many first-term legislators of Macron’s newly founded

The Republic on the March (LRM) party. He denounced the budget cuts and, to applause from the committee, concluded, “I am not going to let anyone f*ck me like that.”

The committee’s president, leading LRM member Jean-Jacques Bridey, supported him: “Not a single soldier should die due to insufficient equipment. Our armies need resources.”

Macron responded on July 13 by publicly upbraiding de Villiers in front of his subordinates at a reception for the army brass before the July 14 Bastille Day military parade. Addressing the officer corps, Macron said: “I find it undignified to have certain debates in public. I have made certain commitments. I am your leader. I know how to keep the commitments that I have made to our fellow citizens and to the army. And on this score, I do not need any pressure or comments.”

De Villiers responded by posting a provocative letter on his Facebook page on Bastille Day. He wrote, “Unusually, I will keep silent on the subject of my next post,” which proved to be his resignation letter. Without naming Macron, he cited General Charles Delestraint’s July 1940 speech on the Nazi conquest of France, before Delestraint entered into the armed Resistance to the French government and its collaboration with the Nazis.

De Villiers wrote, “‘Even though defeat was a fact, his speech was a firm appeal to reject the ‘mentality of a beaten dog or a slave.’ Months later, acting on these words, he became the leader of the Secret Army. Arrested, tortured and deported, he died at the camp in Dachau on April 19, 1945, less than three weeks before the final victory which he had actively help bring about.”

This evocation of Delestraint, while intended to wrap de Villiers in the aura of resistance to Nazism, also

contained a definite threat. Several of Delestraint's fellow leaders of the pro-capitalist, Gaullist factions of the Resistance who survived World War II, like Georges Bidault and Jacques Soustelle, ended up aligning with far-right forces during the Algerian war and supporting the 1961 putsch.

The ongoing public confrontation between the president of France and the leader of its armed forces points to the collapse of democratic forms of rule across Europe. European imperialism's growing military aggressiveness in the quarter century since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991, together with growing social inequality and class conflict at home, have vastly strengthened the political position of the military. European armies not only joined US-led neo-colonial wars from Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya, and Mali, but emerged as key forces in domestic politics.

The growing mood of popular revolt against austerity, social inequality and militarism in Europe was recorded in this year's "Generation What" poll of young people in Europe. It found that more than half of European youth, and over 60 percent of French youth, would be willing to join a "large-scale uprising" against the political system. As it becomes ever clearer that Europe is entering into a pre-revolutionary situation, the ruling class leans ever more heavily on the army and the far right.

In Germany, which launched in 2014 the re-militarization of its foreign policy and a major escalation of military spending, far-right academics and historians are campaigning to rehabilitate Hitler and the Nazis. After an extensive neo-Nazi network was discovered this spring in the German army, including officers posted in France, leading news magazine *Der Spiegel* published an article by military historian Sönke Nitzel calling for Nazi officers to again be held up as role models.

In France, the army was assigned to domestic patrol duty after terror attacks in 2015, under a state of emergency that suspended basic democratic rights and ended judicial oversight of the security forces' policing operations. The state of emergency was then used to justify a brutal crackdown on mass protests by youth and workers against a widely unpopular labour law that Macron now aims to use to impose deep cuts on workers' pay and benefits. These are intended to fund

the multibillion-euro increase in military spending that Macron is preparing.

Macron sought to cultivate the military and police agencies, as well as the far right, as a political base for his reactionary policies. He offered a "Republican salute" to defeated neo-fascist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen on the night of his election. Now, as he pushes for defence spending cuts to maintain a balanced budget before the cuts against the workers go fully into effect, Macron is facing a revolt from officers who refuse any limitations on their prerogatives.

While de Villiers has resigned his position, there is little reason to believe—after he issued a call for resistance—that this will resolve the conflicts that are erupting inside the French ruling elite. Not only are budget conflicts set to intensify, but de Villiers himself has broad support in far-right circles.

His brother is Philippe de Villiers, the leader of a right-wing nationalist and anti-European Union (EU) party based in the Vendée region, the Rally for France (RPF), who indicated his sympathies for Marine Le Pen in the presidential elections this year. While Philippe de Villiers did not formally endorse Le Pen, Arise France (DLF) leader Nicolas Dupont-Aignan did.

Le Pen and leading RPF and DLF officials all praised de Villiers after his resignation yesterday in official statements. Le Pen denounced Macron as "arrogant," saying that his handling of the crisis with de Villiers "illustrates the very serious excesses and the extremely worrying limitations of Mr. Macron, both in his attitudes and in his politics."



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