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# 'De Gaulle' Review: 'A Certain Idea of France'

From the moment he became a voice for freedom during World War II, de Gaulle embodied the Gallic spirit in his time.



Bronze statue of de Gaulle (1993) by Angela Conner, in Carlton Gardens, London. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP

By *Richard Norton Smith*

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"There can be no prestige without mystery," Charles de Gaulle insisted, "for familiarity breeds contempt." Nearly half a century after his death, de Gaulle's prestige has never been greater. Forgetting how divisive a figure he was in life—as evidenced by the nearly 30 assassination attempts he survived—Frenchmen across the political spectrum rank *le grand Charles* above Napoleon, Clemenceau and the Sun King himself. In 1940 de Gaulle redeemed French honor by carrying on the war against Hitler, not from occupied France but from makeshift battle stations in London and equatorial Africa. Before and after Liberation he battled apologists for the quisling Vichy regime of Marshal Philippe Pétain as well as French Communists loyal to Moscow.

In May 1958 he came out of a restless retirement to avert civil war over colonial Algeria. Later that year he established the Fifth Republic, tailored to his contempt for party politicians like former French president Albert Lebrun (1932-40), of whom he observed, "What he lacked as Head of State was that he was no Head and there was no State." Insisting "France is not really herself unless in the front rank," in the 1960s de Gaulle elbowed his

way into the select club of nuclear powers, even as he relinquished an empire and rebranded France a credible champion of Third World interests. Identifying Russian nationalism as a greater threat than Soviet Communism, he warned John Kennedy against a Vietnam quagmire. He recognized Mao's China nearly a decade before Richard Nixon, an unabashed admirer, set foot in Beijing.

Nixon's countrymen showed less appreciation of the aging autocrat in the Élysée Palace. To most Americans in 1969, de Gaulle was the personification of French pride, a nationalistic relic who had withdrawn his country from NATO's military structure, vetoed British membership in the European Economic Community and encouraged Quebecois separatism while on Canadian soil. Such behavior kept de Gaulle center stage in his twilight years. Equally important, it sustained an exaggerated view of French power and influence. ("All my life," he wrote in his war memoirs, "I have had a certain idea of France.")

De Gaulle as illusionist—the theme pervades Julian Jackson's doorstopper of a biography. A British historian noted for his volumes on the 1940 fall of France and the ensuing period of collaboration and resistance, Mr. Jackson sets out to demythologize the General without debunking him. With a fluent style and near-total command of existing and newly available sources, he peers behind the monolithic façade to unmask a composite of opposing traits—the lifelong soldier with a gift for insubordination; the fervent nationalist and champion of Europe "from the Atlantic to the Urals"; the modernizer who could surpass any student protestor in his disdain for the "civilization of the termite heap."

Born in 1890, de Gaulle was the son of a Jesuit-trained academic wounded in the Franco-Prussian War and a mother passionately attached to church and crown. Young Charles was educated in Catholic schools before enrolling at Saint-Cyr, the national military academy. Wounded in the opening days of World War I, he spent much of the war as a German prisoner, making no fewer than five escape attempts. At 6 foot 4 inches, he was a hostage to his own body. "We giants are never at ease with others," he ruefully acknowledged to a wartime aide.

His ungainly physical stature contributed to de Gaulle's natural shyness, a reserve that was mirrored by Yvonne Vendroux, the biscuit maker's daughter he married in 1921. Her husband passed the interwar years in a variety of teaching positions, instructing the officer corps of the new Polish army, lecturing on military history at Saint-Cyr, and writing books on French military doctrine and the self-denying requirements of command. In between tours of duty in the Rhineland and the Middle East, he gained a reputation for challenging official dogma. Given the opportunity to test his advanced theories of battlefield mobility and tank warfare against Nazi invaders, de Gaulle could not wean a fossilized military establishment from its defensive outlook. As a junior minister in the short-lived government of Paul Reynaud (March-June 1940), he rejected the counsel of defeatist

generals who far outranked him.

“What is remarkable about de Gaulle in 1940 is not so much his intellectual analysis of the future of the war,” Mr. Jackson asserts, “as his readiness to *act*”—beginning on the evening of June 18, when the rebellious one-star general lit the flame of French resistance in a little-known BBC radio appeal. Four minutes long, the founding text of Gaullism was initially vetoed by the British Cabinet, which hoped to forestall an armistice between the Nazi victors in Paris and the vassal ministry headed by Marshal Pétain. De Gaulle’s speech, Mr. Jackson writes, “offered a diagnosis, a prediction, an appeal and a message”:

The diagnosis: [France’s] defeat was a purely military affair caused by the superiority of German armaments and tactics. The prediction: the defeat of French forces was not definitive since France still had an Empire, she had an ally in the form of Britain, and behind both was the United States. . . . The appeal: ‘I, General de Gaulle, currently in London, invite the officers and the French soldiers who are located in the British territory . . . to contact me.’ The message: ‘The flame of French resistance must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished.’

The original broadcast was thought too insignificant to preserve for posterity. Many listeners, then and later, assumed “de Gaulle” to be a pseudonym.

In July 1940, Churchill ordered the destruction of the French fleet rather than risk having it fall into Nazi hands. A despondent de Gaulle considered withdrawing to Canada as a private citizen. Two months later the repulse of a hastily planned joint expedition against Dakar, a Vichy stronghold in West Africa, led the leader of Free France to contemplate suicide. All his life de Gaulle battled “military melancholy,” part of the price for willing himself to be that “man of character” to whom his bleeding country would turn in times of crisis. Hidden from the world was the loving devotion and playful forbearance de Gaulle reserved for his daughter Anne, whom he called “my joy and my strength.” Born with Down syndrome, she died of pneumonia in 1948, age 20. Leaving the village churchyard the day of her funeral, de Gaulle clutched his wife’s hand. “Come,” he reportedly said to the grieving mother, “now she is like the others.”

That is something he could never be.

Of course he was insufferable. “The arrogance that makes him from time to time almost impossible to deal with is the reverse side of an extreme sensibility,” wrote British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, no stranger to emotional concealment. “He belongs to the race of unhappy and tortured souls to whom life will never be a pleasure to be enjoyed but an arid desert through which the pilgrim must struggle.” But what a pilgrimage! The initial trickle of recruits who answered his radio call was soon freshened by a parade of French colonies from Chad to Tahiti. His growing prestige



De Gaulle in Paris on Aug. 26, 1944, the day after Germany surrendered the city. PHOTO: CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

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DE GAULLE

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By Julian Jackson

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helped de Gaulle negotiate the byzantine corridors of Resistance politics while also claiming for Free France a status unjustified by its military contributions alone.

More illusions, however adeptly stage-managed. Of all his World War II contemporaries, none achieved so much with fewer resources or more disputed claims to legitimacy. They commanded armies, received deference, governed at the head of existing institutions; de Gaulle's authority, like Free France itself, was largely the product of one man's imagination and, still more, his intransigence. After one especially rancorous confrontation with his prickly ally, Churchill marveled, "His country has given up fighting, he himself is a refugee, and if we turn him down he is finished. Well, just look at him . . . He might be Stalin with 200 divisions behind him."

By contrast Churchill's American counterpart, Franklin Roosevelt, spent much of the war auditioning substitute saviors less inclined to bite the hand that fed them. In November 1942, de Gaulle went into a rage when Eisenhower's armies invaded North Africa without the U.S. informing him in advance. ("I hope the Vichy people throw them back into the sea!") Only with difficulty could he be persuaded to broadcast a message of solidarity the day that Allied troops set foot on the beaches of Normandy.

That de Gaulle's political judgment could be erratic was demonstrated in January 1946. Sixteen months after he strode down the Champs-Élysées to the cheers of liberated Paris, he abandoned his provisional government rather than cede power to the despised "regime of parties." He misgauged the popular appetite for his subsequent return, as wartime memories yielded to fears of dictatorship and the parliamentary games resumed under the guise of the Fourth Republic (1946-58), in which economic and social gains were purchased at the cost of ministerial stability.

Retreating to his austere country house at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, de

Gaule wrote his memoirs and scorned all recognition from his successors in Paris. ("One does not decorate France.") From 1947 to '55 he maintained an awkward oversight of the Rally of the French People (RPF), memorably described by the New York Times as "a party against parties." Then he again left the stage, only to reappear three years later, when a French army employing brutal tactics proved unable to suppress the violent uprising of native Algerians demanding independence.

Mr. Jackson's meticulous reconstruction of the tumultuous month of May 1958, and the decolonizing policies that followed de Gaulle's return to power, constitute the most overtly revisionist parts of his story. He shows us a Machiavellian exile flirting with right-wing army officers whose commitment to *Algérie française* exceeded their allegiance to republican government, while simultaneously flattering Socialist parliamentarians whose support he would need to reclaim power. His pursuit of an Algerian peace was pure pragmatism, spurred by fears of a French army increasingly self-absorbed and tainted by treason. The resulting wound was not easily cauterized. In April 1961, de Gaulle crushed a revolt led by extremist generals. The following year terrorists belonging to the paramilitary OAS ("Algeria Is French and Will Remain So!") came within inches of killing the hero who had betrayed their cause.

De Gaulle's ultimate achievement, Mr. Jackson argues, was less to have granted Algeria independence "than to have persuaded people that that is what he had done; . . . to create a compelling narrative that explained France's disengagement from Algeria and turned it into a victory rather than a defeat." No wonder Richard Nixon would draw on his example a decade later in fashioning the strategic retreat he called Vietnamization. Freed to pursue grandeur on the world stage, de Gaulle undertook triumphal tours through Africa, Latin America and Asia. Presenting France as a civilized alternative to soulless capitalism and socialist tyranny, he cultivated West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, cut off French arms sales to Israel and denounced the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

De Gaulle's personal frugality contrasted sharply with the splendor of his public stewardship. As First Lady of France, Madame de Gaulle did her own marketing, while the couple insisted on paying their personal electric bills at the Élysée Palace. Others were less willing to forgo the fruits of 1960s consumerism. Through a vaguely conceived policy of "association" de Gaulle hoped to narrow the gap between the working class and their employers. Then came May 1968, and the far more radical demands of French students, soon echoed by the country's powerful unions.

Never had the old man seemed so out of touch. On May 29, 1968, his grip on events fading fast, de Gaulle disappeared to a French military base on German soil. Even now, his movements during those frantic 24 hours are more easily traced than his motives. Having assured himself of the armed forces' loyalty, he repaired to Colombey. But only for a night. Back in Paris

the fever broke when Prime Minister Georges Pompidou bought off the unions and de Gaulle took to the airwaves to announce elections for a new National Assembly. A month later the forces of order triumphed at the polls.

Much of the credit, however, went to Pompidou. In establishing a credible successor, de Gaulle had made himself expendable. A victim of his own success, he renounced the presidency in April 1969, following defeat in a referendum on reforming regional government and the French Senate. Asked why he had quit over such a minor issue, he replied, "For the absurdity of it." Once before, in 1946, he had justified abdication by explaining, "One's acts have to be picturesque . . . What is picturesque is not forgotten. I take my mystery away with me."

He took it to his grave, on Nov. 9, 1970, at age 79. But in crafting the finest one-volume life of de Gaulle in English, Julian Jackson has come closer than anyone before him to demystifying this conservative at war with the status quo, for whom national interests were inseparable from personal honor and "a certain idea of France."

*—Mr. Smith, a historian and biographer, is currently at work on a life of Gerald R. Ford.*

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