

DE GAULLE

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Julian Jackson



The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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First published in the United Kingdom as *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle* in 2018 by
Allen Lane, an imprint of
Penguin Random House UK
80 Strand
London, WC2R 0RL

Set in 10.2/13.5 pt Sabon LT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2019
First Harvard University Press edition, 2018
First printing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jackson, Julian, 1954- author.
Title: De Gaulle / Julian Jackson.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. | Published in the United Kingdom as *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle*. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018015618 | ISBN 9780674987210 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780674241459 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Gaulle, Charles de, 1890-1970. | Presidents--France--Biography. | Generals--France--Biography. | France--Politics and government--20th century.

Classification: LCC DC420 J334 2018 | DDC 944.083/6092 [B] --dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018015618>

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Acknowledgements

The research and much of the writing of this book were made possible by the award of a three-year Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, for which I am deeply grateful. The bounty of the Leverhulme Trust to academics at every stage of their career is one of the saving graces of British academia. A sabbatical year from Queen Mary allowed me to complete the manuscript.

At the Archives Nationales in Paris, I am indebted to Nicole Even, who catalogued the de Gaulle archives for the period of his Presidency. I also benefited at the Archives Nationales from the help and friendship of Caroline Piketty. Over fifteen years ago, Philippe Oulmont welcomed me at the Fondation Charles de Gaulle, offering assistance and advice – as he has continued to do since his retirement from the Fondation. Claude Marmot, also of the Fondation, shared with me her unrivalled knowledge of the de Gaulle family history, and allowed me to consult the unpublished letters of de Gaulle's brother Jacques to his parents during the Great War.

Among friends and colleagues who have helped in the writing of this book, two deserve special thanks. At Queen Mary, James Ellison shared with me copies of many documents from the National Archives, and from American archives, which he had used for his own work. This act of characteristic generosity saved me weeks of work. He was also kind enough to read the chapters on Gaullist foreign policy, a subject on which he has written with great authority. In Paris, I must thank above all Maurice Vaisse, whose selfless work editing the French diplomatic documents is a major resource to all historians of the period. In addition, his kindness and help to me have been invaluable.

Robert Gildea, who read the entire manuscript for Penguin, also offered many useful suggestions.

Among others in England, France, the United States and elsewhere who have answered queries or contributed in other ways to the writing of this book (even if they may not remember that they have done), I would like

to thank in particular: Grey Anderson, Claire Andrieu, Peter Catterall, Laurent Douzou, Yves de Gaulle, Charlotte Faucher, Martyn Frampton, Gabriel Gorodetsky, Sudhir Hazareesingh, Peter Hennessy, Patrick Higgins, the late Stanley Hoffmann, Colin Jones, Rod Kedward, Andy Knapp, Chantal Morelle, Michael Moriarty, Robert Paxton, Guillaume Piketty, Dominique Parcollet, Robert Service, Todd Shepard, Iain Stewart, Renée Poznanski, Edward Stourton, Robert Tombs, David Valence, Olivier Wieviorka.

My agent, Andrew Gordon, has been continuously supportive. He was kind enough to read an entire draft of the book and offered many perceptive comments. The team at Penguin has lived up to its reputation. Peter James was a ferociously eagle-eyed copyeditor who saved me from many solecisms, and Cecilia Mackay a brilliantly resourceful picture researcher. Richard Duguid, Rebecca Lee and Ben Sinyor saw the book into print with great professionalism. Stuart Proffitt lived up to his legend: no editor with whom I have worked has ever taken more care with a manuscript.

Finally, my deepest thanks as ever go to Douglas, who has put up with de Gaulle invading our life and spreading over every surface. It is not easy for a tidy interior designer to live with an untidy academic. I wish I could promise him that we are now finished with de Gaulle.

Julian Jackson
February 2018

Introduction

DE GAULLE IS EVERYWHERE

In France today, Charles de Gaulle is everywhere: in memories, in street names, in monuments, in bookshops. At the most recent count over 3,600 localities had a public space – street, avenue, square, roundabout – named after him. This puts de Gaulle ahead of Pasteur, who comes a close second (3,001), and Victor Hugo, who comes third (2,258).¹ The grandest space in Paris, site of Napoleon's Arc de Triomphe, was renamed the Place de l'Etoile-Charles de Gaulle immediately after his death. Walking from there down the Champs-Élysées, one soon reaches a statue of de Gaulle striding resolutely forward. Turning right at the statue, one crosses the Seine to the Hôtel des Invalides, France's army museum, which houses a separate museum exclusively devoted to de Gaulle. Entering this museum is like crossing the threshold of a sacred Gaullist space.

When an opinion poll in 2010 asked the French to rank the most important figures in their history, 44 per cent placed de Gaulle top (he accumulated 70 per cent of all choices), far ahead of Napoleon in second place with 14 per cent (38 per cent).² All politicians, from left to right, invoke de Gaulle's name. At the Presidential elections of 2012 he was cited as an example by both the Socialist François Hollande and his right-wing (supposedly Gaullist) opponent Nicolas Sarkozy – and by pretty well everyone else. Even the extreme-right Front National, whose founder Jean-Marie Le Pen was once a visceral anti-Gaullist, now celebrates de Gaulle's legacy. But no contemporary French politician has more consciously sought inspiration in de Gaulle than Emmanuel Macron, whose official photograph as President shows him in front of a table on which one book lies open: the Pléiade edition of de Gaulle's *War Memoirs*.

De Gaulle increasingly floats free of the history of which he was the protagonist. Recent books include a playful squib about a meeting in Ireland between de Gaulle and Jean-Paul Sartre (the two men never met); a

fable which imagines de Gaulle coming back from the dead to save traditional French egg mayonnaise and defend gay rights; a strip cartoon about de Gaulle on the beach; a 'Dictionary of a lover of de Gaulle' whose author visits Gaullian sites as one might trace the footsteps of a saint.³

This extraordinary unanimity around de Gaulle in France could not have been predicted when he left power in 1969. It airbrushes out of history how much, throughout his career, he was a brutally divisive figure. During his thirty years in politics, de Gaulle was the most revered figure of modern French history – and the most hated. He was reviled and idealized, loathed and adored, in equal measure. Other twentieth-century French political figures have been hated but none with such intensity as de Gaulle. For some people hating him gave meaning to their lives; others were driven mad by it. Such was the fate of the conservative politician Henri de Kérillis, who started as a passionate supporter of de Gaulle, broke with him in 1942 and spent his declining years in the United States, a broken and pathetic figure convinced that Gaullist agents were lurking at every street corner ready to inflict violence on him. The strange character of anti-Gaullist pathology is evident from just the titles of the books published in the years 1964–70 of a former Gaullist resister, André Figueras, who later turned against his onetime hero: *Charles le dérisoire* (Charles the Contemptible), *Le Général mourra* (The General will Die), *Les Gaullistes vont en enfer* (The Gaullists will Go to Hell), *De Gaulle impuissant* (De Gaulle the Impotent). There is much more in this vein in the Figueras catalogue. When de Gaulle resigned in 1969, one extreme-right newspaper carried the headline: 'The beast is dead, but the poison lives on.'

Hatred went beyond words. De Gaulle was the target of about thirty serious assassination attempts, two of which – in September 1961 and August 1962 – nearly succeeded. For some anti-Gaullists, the fixation on de Gaulle became so incorporated into their personality that their original reasons for wanting to kill him were eclipsed by the hatred he inspired. This was true, for example, of André Rossfelder, who planned the last serious assassination attempt against him in 1964. Like many anti-Gaullist fanatics, he hated de Gaulle for having accepted Algerian independence in 1962. But even after that battle had been lost, Rossfelder still plotted to eliminate him. When asked why, he replied: 'Because he is still there; simply so that I no longer have to go on thinking about the tyrant.'⁴ At the other end of the spectrum were those whose reverence for de Gaulle lay somewhere between loyalty to a feudal lord and faith in a religious leader. Of the novelist André Malraux, one Gaullist wrote: 'Like all of us he entered into the Gaullian enterprise as one enters into a religion.'⁵

If the lives of the French were so passionately caught up in their

relationship with de Gaulle, it was because he was the central actor in France's two twentieth-century civil wars. The first civil war resulted from France's defeat by Germany in 1940, when the government of Marshal Pétain signed an armistice with Hitler. Refusing to accept this decision, de Gaulle departed for London to continue the battle. His act of defiance transformed him into a rebel against the legal government headed by the most revered figure in France: the first shots fired by the soldiers who had rallied to de Gaulle were directed against other French soldiers, not against the Germans. Over the next four years, de Gaulle claimed that he, not Pétain, represented the 'true' France. He returned to France in 1944, acclaimed as a national hero, and head of a provisional government until he resigned from power in January 1946.

Another conflict broke out in November 1954 when Algerian nationalists launched their fight for independence from France. The eight-year Algerian War brought de Gaulle back to power in 1958 and culminated in Algerian independence four years later. Although ostensibly a war of decolonization, the conflict had the characteristics of a civil war. Administratively Algeria was part of France, and had been 'French' since 1830, longer than the city of Nice (French since 1859). Those who wanted to hold on to Algeria boasted that the Mediterranean ran through France like the Seine through Paris. Many of the one million Europeans of Algeria had lived there for generations. It genuinely was their home, and for them its loss was even more traumatic than France's defeat by Germany in 1940.

In addition to his central role in these two conflicts, de Gaulle challenged the way that the French thought about their history and politics. After returning to power in 1958, he radically transformed France's political institutions, breaking with the shibboleths of the Republican tradition inherited from the Revolution of 1789. His vision of France's place in the world, encapsulated in the elusive concept of 'grandeur', was admired by some and viewed by others as nationalist posturing. Finally, in May 1968, in the twilight of his career, de Gaulle was the target of the most dramatic revolutionary upheaval in twentieth-century French history.

Some who revered de Gaulle between 1940 and 1944 opposed him over Algeria; some opposed him in both conflicts; some supported him in both; others who had opposed him between 1940 and 1944 supported his return to power in 1958 before turning against him again. The anti-Americanism of his foreign policy of grandeur attracted some on the left who simultaneously opposed his authoritarian style of government. There is truth in de Gaulle's quip 'Everybody is, has been or will be "Gaullist".'⁶ But there is also truth in the comment made by an observer on the eve of the 1965 Presidential election: 'Outside the ultra-faithful, everyone has

been, is or will be anti-Gaullist. The worst of it is that each of us is both Gaullist and anti-Gaullist and that the division runs through each of our consciences.⁷

De Gaulle's admirers have included both Henry Kissinger and Osama bin Laden. He has been compared by admirers and detractors to French figures as diverse as Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, Richelieu, Henri IV, Louis XIV, Danton, Saint-Just, Napoleon I, Chateaubriand, Napoleon III, General Boulanger, Léon Gambetta and Georges Clemenceau; and to non-French figures as diverse as Bismarck, Franco, Kerensky, Mussolini, Salazar, Mao, Bolívar, Castro and Jesus Christ. The range of these comparisons reflects de Gaulle's extraordinary contradictions: he was a soldier who spent most of his career fighting the army; a conservative who often talked like a revolutionary; a man of passion who found it almost impossible to express emotions.

'IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD?'

Both the hatred once inspired by de Gaulle and the current adulation create difficulties for a biographer. There is a 'black legend' that has left its traces: half-truths and slurs cling to his memory like barnacles. But escaping from the current hagiography is no less of a problem. Systematic 'demystification' would miss a lot because as Alain Peyrefitte, de Gaulle's Minister of Information during the 1960s, wrote: 'the truth of the General is in his legend.'⁸ By this he meant that (as was also true of Napoleon) one of de Gaulle's greatest achievements was the myth that he constructed around himself. This was put in more poetic form by the historian Pierre Nora, who observed that those who write about de Gaulle cannot easily escape the frame of reference de Gaulle himself imposes on those who scrutinize him – 'like a painting by Vermeer where the light that seems to be illuminating the picture in fact comes from the picture itself'.⁹

In de Gaulle's case, the 'light' comes from his own words. In the epigraph to a book he published in 1932, he quoted Goethe's *Faust*: 'In the beginning was the word? No, in the beginning was the deed.' With de Gaulle 'word' and 'deed' are inseparable. The 'deed' that launched him in 1940 was a speech – a speech almost no one actually heard. But subsequent speeches fared better, and for millions of French people between 1940 and 1944 'de Gaulle' existed as a voice heard on the radio. In the 1950s, de Gaulle crafted his legend in his *War Memoirs*. In the 1960s, when he was President of France, it was often said that he governed through the magic of his rhetoric and his mastery of television.

Any biographer of de Gaulle risks being trapped like a fly in the web of his words. Speaking to a journalist in 1966 de Gaulle commented:

The things that I want to be known, that I consider to be important, I think about them for a long time. I write them down. I learn them by heart . . . This costs me the most terrible effort . . . They are the only things which count in my eyes. And then there are other things I say, that I throw out without having prepared them, without really thinking, without having learnt them, that I say to nobody in particular . . . None of that has any importance or value in my eyes. But you journalists, you report these remarks as well.¹⁰

De Gaulle vigilantly policed this official record of ‘things which count’. Apart from his four volumes of *Memoirs* (three volumes of war memoirs published in the 1950s and one volume covering the years 1958–62 published in 1970), he authorized the publication of five volumes of selected speeches in which he obsessively corrected the placing of every comma. Yet this collection of speeches needs to be treated critically – which we can do by examining just the first six pages. It opens with the most celebrated speech of all: that of 18 June 1940. What we read is certainly the speech de Gaulle *wanted* to deliver, but, owing to British pressure, the first two sentences of the speech he actually delivered were different. The next speech in the collection is dated 19 June 1940. The truth, however, is that de Gaulle delivered *no* speech on 19 June – because the British would not allow him to. And the alleged ‘19 June’ speech that is published contains references to events that occurred after 19 June. So it must have been written later but was never delivered. The collection then gives us two speeches de Gaulle *did* deliver on 22 June and 24 June, but it misses out another short one on

June that de Gaulle preferred retrospectively to gloss over because it announced the formation of a committee under his leadership that never saw the light of day owing to British opposition. So, in the first six pages of de Gaulle’s officially collected speeches, we are offered a speech that *was* delivered but not in the form we read it; a speech that was *never* delivered (and not even written on the day it was supposed to have been delivered); and we lack a speech that was delivered.

After de Gaulle’s death, his son began publishing in chronological order ten volumes of letters, notebooks and memoranda from his official archives and family papers. This collection is a vital source for studying de Gaulle, and would presumably also come under the category of ‘written’ documents accepted by de Gaulle himself as having ‘value in my eyes’. But these volumes have problems too. For example, they contain a famous speech de Gaulle made on 6 June 1958 but missing out the final words ‘*Vive l’Algérie française*’. Whether or not he wrote these words, no one denies that he uttered them.

In addition to the mass of written texts that have been published, there is a huge corpus of reported conversations. During his lifetime, de Gaulle would give off-the-record interviews to favoured journalists. One of the first sources used for studying him (and still useful today) was a series of books produced in his lifetime by the well-connected journalist Jean-Raymond Tournoux, who was a frequent recipient of de Gaulle's confidences and *bons mots*. De Gaulle's son Philippe claimed later that Tournoux was a man who listened at keyholes, but the truth was that in this case he did not need to because the door had been opened wide to him by de Gaulle, who found these off-the-record encounters useful for his own purposes.¹¹ It was Tournoux who first reported de Gaulle's famous *boutade*, 'How can one govern a country which has 258 cheeses?' Such remarks start to take on a life of their own, existing in a kind of ether where one is never sure exactly what was said or whether it was said at all. (The precise number of cheeses, for example, varies wildly in different versions of this comment.) This matters more in the case of Algeria, about which de Gaulle made so many gnomic private comments to different visitors in the 1950s that it becomes difficult to decipher what he really thought.

After de Gaulle's death, most of these unattributed remarks turned out to be 'authentic' because they recur in another important source of 'Gauliana': the torrent of memoirs, diaries and journals from those who worked in close proximity to him. Of these, the most extensive were the 2,000 pages of conversations – more accurately monologues – published by Alain Peyrefitte, and the 1,500 pages of conversations published by Jacques Foccart, de Gaulle's adviser on African affairs, who saw him almost every day during the 1960s. What status should we attribute to this material? They do not necessarily offer a greater 'truth' than the official written utterances or the off-the-cuff comments to journalists. De Gaulle's conversation was often a performance; 'he plays his scales', as one of his aides put it. But it would be wrong to go to the other extreme of discounting this material just because de Gaulle did not literally 'write' it. All these sources allow us to hear different registers of his voice.

In the book he published on leadership in 1932, de Gaulle wrote that great leaders needed to display mystery, ruse and hypocrisy. On the other hand, Stalin – judging, it is true, by an exacting standard of deviousness – remarked to Churchill that de Gaulle was uncomplicated. De Gaulle elevated mystery into an art of government but was often more transparent than he pretended to be, or wanted to be. It is striking how often, despite de Gaulle's reputation for dissimulation, there is a congruence between his public utterances and his private ones – even if the tone is different. In the last few years, historians have for the first time had access to de Gaulle's

archives. But these do not fundamentally change our knowledge. His son had already done a good job of extracting the most important documents for publication. What we do lack is the whole of de Gaulle's private correspondence with his family. Some of this has been published, but there is probably much more which might help to elucidate that opaque phenomenon: de Gaulle the private man. To understand de Gaulle's political career, however, we should not expect some extraordinary future revelations. The challenge is to interpret the material that is now available.

DE GAULLE AND HIS BIOGRAPHERS

How have these issues been handled by de Gaulle's biographers? The literature on de Gaulle has reached massive proportions. More has been written about him than about any other figure in modern French history except Napoleon. There is an institution, the Fondation Charles de Gaulle, entirely devoted to studying him. Established just after his death, by 2011 the Fondation had published the proceedings of over forty conferences devoted to him. Some of these examine particular moments of his career; others address themes like 'De Gaulle and Medicine', 'De Gaulle and Science', 'De Gaulle and the Media', 'De Gaulle and the Law', 'De Gaulle and Religion', 'De Gaulle and the Young' and so on. De Gaulle, a man, a legend, a symbol, is now also an academic industry.

Among innumerable biographies, three stand out. First, the monumental three volumes published by Jean Lacouture between 1985 and 1988. For three decades Lacouture was a brilliant left-wing journalist who spent much of his career covering the Third World as a committed supporter of decolonization. In 1965, during his subject's Presidency, he produced a short biography in which his 'respect' for the de Gaulle of 1940, who had refused defeat, and for the de Gaulle of 1962, who had accepted Algerian independence, was qualified by his hostility to the 'nationalist boasting' of the 'reactionary' de Gaulle of the mid-1960s. Three years later, in a second edition, he ratcheted up his criticism to depict de Gaulle as 'a personality in thrall to hallucinatory xenophobia'. Although de Gaulle's secretariat judged this book too 'unpleasant' to be shown to him, de Gaulle himself was made of sterner stuff. Reading the book he made the priceless comment that 'the author has certainly not grasped the full dimension of the personality.'¹²

That criticism could certainly not be made of the 3,000 pages Lacouture devoted to de Gaulle when returning to the subject twenty years later – in expiation for his earlier irreverence. By then he had developed into a prolific biographer, starting with Nasser and Ho Chi Minh, and moving on to

such left-wing French icons as Léon Blum and Pierre Mendès France. This choice of subjects gives a sense of the leftist pantheon into which Lacouture now tried to squeeze de Gaulle. Lacouture was always unapologetic about needing to admire his subjects, but because de Gaulle was not an entirely natural fit, his book reads like a prolonged dialogue between author and subject. Every biographer of de Gaulle has to address the extent to which de Gaulle was influenced in his younger days by ideas of the extreme-right-wing writer Charles Maurras, whose newspaper *Action française* was dedicated to opposing France's parliamentary Republic. Whatever de Gaulle's view of Maurras, one question that needs to be asked of him is: when did he become a 'republican' and what kind of republican did he become? Lacouture irons out the difficulties. For example, in discussing de Gaulle's attitude to Hitler's Germany in the 1930s he tells us that 'in the great debate between dictatorship and democracy de Gaulle did not hesitate over the decision to take'; he was a 'determined adversary of fascism'. In truth, de Gaulle, while certainly never a 'fascist', was not in this period especially worried by fascism – or interested in democracy. He was first and foremost an adversary of *Germany*.¹³

When Lacouture found himself labelled a Gaullist he tetchily responded that he was 'neither a hardcore Gaullist nor a soft Gaullist . . . but a tenacious a-Gaullist'. His way of summing the matter up was to say: 'Montaigne admired the Romans – but from afar, and certainly not with the intention of offering up Cato as a model for his fellow citizens.'¹⁴ 'A-Gaullist' or not, there is no concealing Lacouture's immeasurable admiration and intuitive 'feel' for his subject. But his admiration often tips into myth-making – as in his description of de Gaulle's crucial meeting with Churchill at 10 Downing Street on 17 June 1940:

Churchill's great predator's eye had recognized the 'man of destiny' and the Constable of France in this hitherto taciturn giant. Already at Briare [when they met a few days earlier] he had scrutinized this face staring out of a Plantagenet chronicle, he girded it with a helmet . . . and admitted it to that round table where the descendants of the Marlboroughs welcomed a select band of knights.¹⁵

This is splendid purple prose; it is not history. We do not know whether Churchill had such hallucinations since he did not deign to mention that meeting with de Gaulle in his own memoirs. The truth is probably that Churchill, happy to welcome any Frenchman ready to fight on, distractedly made de Gaulle a non-committal promise about being allowed to broadcast, and had him ushered out as fast as possible so that he could turn to more important matters.

Or let us take Lacouture's account of the speech delivered by de Gaulle on 25 August 1944, the day Paris was liberated:

This figure towering above upturned faces as in an El Greco Ascension, his arms taking the shape of a lyre, the giant's face thrown back as though for a consecration . . . Here de Gaulle truly spoke for the nation; he was the echo of the great Christian orators and of the members of the Convention calling for a mass rising.¹⁶

The speech is indeed moving, but it was also carefully calculated, and many contemporary listeners were bitterly disappointed and certainly did not think de Gaulle was speaking for them or for the nation.

In the end, despite its panache, there is too much mythologizing in Lacouture for his account of de Gaulle to be satisfying. The second major biography of de Gaulle is by the historian-journalist Paul-Marie de La Gorce. Unlike Lacouture, de La Gorce was happy to call himself a Gaullist but as one of a strange subspecies known as 'left Gaullists'.¹⁷ He wrote a first biography in 1965 while de Gaulle was still President. De Gaulle read the proofs and offered suggestions and commentary. In 1999, thirty years after de Gaulle's death, de La Gorce offered another version running to almost 1,500 pages.¹⁸ While Lacouture wrestles with his subject, de La Gorce has no doubts why he reveres de Gaulle: 'In the work accomplished by General de Gaulle, decolonization will remain undoubtedly the most ineffaceable mark that he brought to the history of the century.'¹⁹ He often confuses the magical power of de Gaulle's rhetoric with the reality of his policies. For the man who came close to declaring war on Britain in 1945 because he wanted to defend the French Empire in Syria; whose government presided over a massacre of Algerian nationalists at Sétif in 1945; who then dragged the French into an unwinnable war to save French Indo-China in 1946; and who, once France had abandoned her African Empire, devised ingenious new ways of hanging on to influence in Africa, the image of prophetic decolonizer needs serious qualification.

The third – and most recent (2002) – biography of de Gaulle could not be more different except in its scale (1,000 pages). Its author, Eric Roussel, made his reputation with a biography of Jean Monnet, famous as an architect of the European Community, a believer in European supranationalism and a committed Atlanticist – all anathema to de Gaulle. Roussel went on to write an admiring biography of de Gaulle's second Prime Minister, and successor, the pragmatic conservative Georges Pompidou. But by the end of de Gaulle's life Pompidou had become so estranged from de Gaulle that some Gaullists dubbed him the 'anti-de Gaulle'.²⁰ So Roussel's previous choices of biographical subject give a sense of his affinities and point of

departure: that of a liberal conservative, European federalist and Atlanticist. The contribution made by Roussel's book lies in the extensive use he makes of American, British and Canadian archives and of new French ones. His vision of de Gaulle is less Francocentric than those of Lacouture and de La Gorce. It is the most seriously researched biography of de Gaulle and is fully aware of the 'dimension' of the personality. But, by an accumulation of small touches, he paints a subtly negative portrait. Take his treatment of de Gaulle's resignation in January 1946. There has been much speculation about why de Gaulle resigned, and how he expected to return to power. What Roussel offers us on this episode are two pages of characteristically deranged remarks by the ardent Gaullist André Malraux to the British Ambassador. Malraux predicted blood in the streets and declared that de Gaulle would return as a dictator to save the west. Since this is the only contemporary commentary on de Gaulle's resignation that Roussel provides, the reader is nudged towards believing that this reflects de Gaulle's thinking: 'One can doubt that Malraux would express himself in this way . . . without the agreement, at least tacit, of the General.'²¹ Or to take another example, when de Gaulle was promoted to general in June 1940 Roussel quotes at length from an article of praise in *Action française* – guilt by association? – and goes on to suggest that the article's dithyrambic tone gives credence to the rumour that de Gaulle had once, under a pseudonym, been the military correspondent of this monarchist newspaper. There is no evidence for this improbable assertion.²² By subtle insinuations of this kind Roussel subliminally constructs the picture of de Gaulle as an anachronistic right-wing nationalist. So the best biography of de Gaulle is also one that is insidiously hostile to its subject.

THE DE GAULLE BATTLEFIELD

All biographers must guard against the temptation to impose excessive coherence on their subject.²³ The temptation is all the greater in de Gaulle's case because there seems to be a granite-like consistency to his personality and beliefs. The most famous sentence he ever wrote is the opening to his *War Memoirs*: '*All my life* [my italics] I have had a certain idea of France.' One historian has offered an interesting interpretation which views the constitution of 1958 as the embodiment of liberal Catholic ideas de Gaulle had inherited from his family in the late 1890s – the assumption being that de Gaulle's political ideas never changed.²⁴ But the evidential basis of this intriguing theory is very thin. In the 1960s, foreign diplomats and French politicians, desperate to understand de Gaulle's unpredictable policies,

would frequently seek clues in the short book on leadership he had published forty years earlier. But this book offers no doctrine and no explicit views on politics. It is a portrait of what a leader should *be* and it could be read even as a self-portrait in anticipation – but it tells us nothing specific about what the leader should *do*. Indeed one of its key messages is the importance of contingency in politics. This has led one astute (and admiring) commentator on de Gaulle to comment on the ‘ideological emptiness of Gaullism: a stance not a doctrine; an attitude not a coherent set of dogmas; a style without much substance’.²⁵

De Gaulle’s ambiguities made people unsure how to respond to him at different stages of his career and also led to much speculation about what he believed. This was true, for example, of a group of French Socialists who found themselves in London during the war. Like de Gaulle they opposed Marshal Pétain, but many of them were also suspicious of de Gaulle while realizing that, whether they liked it or not, he was becoming a potent symbol of resistance in France. They endlessly debated their position towards him. One of them who decided, not without hesitation, to rally behind him gave his reasons during one of these anguished discussions: ‘Even if you do not have confidence in de Gaulle, we need to struggle to transform something that does really exist [that is, de Gaulle], and that does, whether one likes it or not, represent the reality of the resistance of the people of France.’²⁶ Of course, de Gaulle was not a blank sheet, and those who thought they could ‘transform’ him were often badly disappointed, but sometimes they were proved right. De Gaulle may have had a certain idea of France ‘all his life’ but it was not always the same idea.

When de Gaulle came back to power in 1958, no one knew his intentions regarding Algeria, and commentators spilled acres of ink trying to discern what he ‘really’ thought. Historians and biographers have followed suit. The truth is that, although he had some idea of what he did *not* want to do in Algeria, he was open-minded about the rest. As in 1940, he could be transformed by the context. During the tense months of May 1958 when the French army in Algeria was in revolt against the Paris government and it seemed possible that paratroopers might land at any moment in mainland France, Jean Lacouture, at that time a *Le Monde* journalist, rang Jean-Marie Domenach, a journalist friend who edited the periodical *Esprit*. Domenach was worried about what de Gaulle might do if he took power with the support of the military. Would it be necessary to enter into a new Resistance – this time against de Gaulle? Lacouture was reassuring: ‘De Gaulle is not a General, he is a battlefield.’²⁷ By this he meant that the outcome would be determined not just by the decisions taken by de Gaulle but by political forces over which he had limited control.

Once de Gaulle was in power, and once Algeria had become independent, the new style of Gaullism that emerged during the 1960s was the result not only of the choices made by the President himself but of those imposed by economists, other experts and civil servants, many of whom had opposed his return but now took the view that they could make something of him. As one of them put it: ‘Why have the good luck of de Gaulle being there, if the opportunity is not used to solve [certain] . . . problems?’²⁸ Throughout his political career de Gaulle played with brio the role of charismatic leader whose portrait he had painted in the 1920s, and he harboured certain fixed ideas about the world which he carried with him all his life. But he was also the figure through whom the French fought out their history and politics, and they made him as much as he made them.²⁹

PART ONE

De Gaulle before ‘De Gaulle’, 1890–1940

There is no moment of my life when I was not certain that one day I would be at the head of France . . . But things worked out in a way that I did not predict. I always thought that I would be Minister of War and that everything would come from that . . .

De Gaulle, May 1946, in Claude Mauriac,
Un autre de Gaulle, 99

I

Beginnings, 1890–1908

A VOICE FROM LONDON

De Gaulle was a voice before he was a face. He entered history through a short BBC broadcast from London on the evening of 18 June 1940. Six weeks earlier, the German army had launched its assault on France. The French were overwhelmed with extraordinary rapidity, and on 17 June the head of the French government, Marshal Philippe Pétain, announced on French radio that he would be suing for an armistice with Germany. De Gaulle's speech the next day was a challenge to Pétain's defeatism:

The leaders who, for many years, have been at the head of the French armies, have formed a government.

This government, alleging that our armies are defeated, has made contact with the enemy to end the fighting.

Certainly we have been overwhelmed by the mechanized forces of the enemy, on the ground and in the air.

Infinitely more than their number, it was the tanks, the aeroplanes, the tactics of the Germans which forced us into retreat. It was the tanks, the aeroplanes, the tactics of the Germans that took our leaders by surprise to the point of bringing them to where they are today.

But has the last word been said? Must hope disappear? Is the defeat definitive? No!

Believe me, I am someone who speaks to you with full knowledge of the facts and I tell you that nothing is lost for France. The same means that conquered us can one day bring us victory.

For France is not alone! She is not alone! She is not alone! She has a vast Empire behind her. She can make common cause with the British Empire which controls the seas and continues the struggle. She can, like England, use without limit the immense industry of the United States.

This war is not limited to the unfortunate territory of our country. This war is not decided by the Battle of France. This war is a world war. Despite all our mistakes, all our failure to catch up, all our sufferings, there are in the world all the means necessary one day to overcome our enemies. Struck down today by mechanized force, we will be able to conquer in the future by a superior mechanical force. The destiny of the world is at stake.

I, General de Gaulle, currently in London, invite the officers and the French soldiers who are located in British territory or who may be in the future, with their weapons or without their weapons; I invite the engineers and the special workers of armament industries who are located in British territory or who may be in future, to contact me.

Whatever happens, the flame of the French resistance must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished.

Tomorrow, as today, I will speak on Radio London.¹

Few people heard de Gaulle's broadcast. Nor can we hear it today because the BBC did not think it was important enough to keep the recording. De Gaulle spoke many more times over the following weeks, and increasing numbers of people started tuning into his speeches. Later they were vague in their own minds about whether they had actually heard his first broadcast, although they wanted to think they had. One future Gaullist, who was only a boy in 1940, writes in his memoirs: 'On the evening of 18 June in the evening, in an alley bordered by holiday homes surrounded by gardens, I *think I remember* [my italics] having heard the speech of 18 June. The windows of the villa were open and a radio was relaying a speech which seemed unexpected to my ears.'² One person who knew he had *not* heard it was the writer Léon Werth who spent the Occupation deep in the French countryside. His diary charts his growing enthusiasm for de Gaulle, but he did not know what de Gaulle had said in that first broadcast until four years later when it was read out again (not by de Gaulle) on the BBC after D-Day. If Werth did not hear de Gaulle's first speech, it was because on that day, like millions of other French people, he was fleeing south as the Germans advanced: 'I was near the River Loire. I only got rumours that I could pick up on the road and incoherent snatches of false information, given out by a poor radio set plugged into a car battery. So on that 18 June I did not hear de Gaulle.'³ Forty years later, the President of France Valéry Giscard d'Estaing offered a contrasting memory:

As a young boy of 14, I remember hearing in our house in the Auvergne the voice of General de Gaulle. One afternoon, June 18, my uncle came to find us: 'Come along! There is going to be something important. They are announcing a declaration of General de Gaulle.' We sat in a semi-circle around the

radio . . . We had the presentiment that the course of events had changed. For each of us, the black band that had come to cover the image of France was on that day wiped away.⁴

Giscard was no Gaullist, and since this ‘memory’ coincided with a moment when he was desperate for the support of Gaullist politicians, it must be taken with a pinch of salt.

Few contemporary diarists refer to the speech of 18 June. One who did was the Prefect of the Paris Police, Roger Langeron, who wrote in his diary on that day: ‘Today is a great day. A voice reaches us from London.’ But the famous words he cites from de Gaulle – ‘France has lost the battle; she has not lost the war’ – were not in the speech of 18 June, even if they convey its essence. Those words are to be found in a proclamation which was produced as a poster by the Free French in London during July. Probably Langeron touched up his diary when it was published immediately after the war to make it seem as if he had heard the broadcast.⁵ One rare diarist who did authentically mention the 18 June speech was the art historian and future resister Agnès Humbert, who like Léon Werth had been swept up in the wave of refugees fleeing Paris. On 18 June she landed up in a small village south of Paris. Desperate for news, and luckier than Werth, she found a radio: ‘It is tuned to London. By pure fluke I find myself listening to a broadcast in French. They announce a speech by a French General. I don’t catch his name. His delivery, jerky and peremptory, is not well suited to the radio. He calls on the French to rally round him, to continue the struggle. I feel I have come back to life. A feeling that I had thought had died for ever stirs again: hope.’⁶ Even when Humbert was told the name of the ‘French General’, it meant nothing to her. A few months later, as a member of one of France’s first Resistance groups, she found herself distributing tracts in support of de Gaulle, but she still had little idea who he was:

How bizarre it all is! Here we are, most of us on the wrong side of forty, careering along like students all fired up with passion and fervour, in the wake of a leader of whom we know absolutely nothing, of whom none of us has even seen a photograph. In the whole course of human history, has there ever been anything quite like it? Thousands upon thousands of people, fired by blind faith, following an unknown figure. Perhaps this strange anonymity is even an asset: the mystery of the unknown!⁷

De Gaulle was indeed unknown to the vast majority of the French people. Where did he come from? What did he believe? What did he look like? Few people had any idea. As late as October 1942, Léon Werth, who had

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