
CURRENT BOOKS

Savior of Modern France

DE GAULLE. Vol. I: The Rebel, 1899–1944. Vol II: The Ruler, 1945–1970. By Jean Lacouture. Norton. 614 pp.; 640 pp. \$29.95 each

As a subject, Charles de Gaulle meets all the Aristotelian requirements for the tragic hero: the man who reaches high estate, then falls from it, generally through some inbuilt flaw. The brave soul attempting the definitive biography of such a man faces many problems. First, millions of words have already been written about de Gaulle (even while considerable archival material remains locked up in the family vaults). Second, there were at least four separate de Gaulles: the professional soldier; the military thinker and visionary; the Man of June 1940, rallying point of Free France; and the politician and national leader of the postwar era. To make matters harder, each one of these de Gaulles wore masks of great complexity.

De Gaulle was born on November 22, 1890, the son of a Parisian schoolmaster, and though he missed being of the sign of Scorpio by one day, he displayed throughout his life many of the supposed traits of that astrological sign—brilliance, passion, arrogance, and a terrible tendency to self-destruction. It was this last trait, sadly, that marked the end of de Gaulle's extraordinary career.

He always had, in his own widely circulated words, "a certain idea of France." It was one of lofty, scornful, and virtually unattainable sublimity. His idealism almost inevitably brought on disillusion: The French were not quite good enough for France (a view that is occasionally shared by exasperated tourists). To a more paranoid degree, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin had similar doubts about their own countrymen; Stalin even did something about his misgivings, to the grave misfortune of

10 million Soviet citizens. This, however, is where any such invidious parallel ends. Whatever Franklin D. Roosevelt may have thought about him, de Gaulle was never, and never wished to be, a dictator.

De Gaulle stood out from the earliest days of his military career. A major at St. Cyr, France's West Point, described the graduating cadet as already "calm and forceful in command." The young officer had one supreme hero, Colonel Philippe Pétain, the commander who preached that "firepower kills." At a time when the prevailing philosophy of the French army was to attack "regardless of cost," this was an almost heretically unorthodox doctrine—that lives could be saved by massive artillery preparation. Pétain's strategy was to save (almost too late) the lives of many hundreds of thousands of French soldiers in World War I. It was to Pétain's 33rd Regiment that de Gaulle specifically asked to be sent and in which he was wounded and captured during the terrible battle of Verdun, in March 1916. As a POW, de Gaulle spent the rest of the war in Germany, ruminating on military theory as well as on that "certain idea."

Jean Lacouture, formerly the foreign editor of *Le Monde*, honed his biographical skills with books on two French premiers, Léon Blum and Pierre Mendès-France. He handles skillfully the long and ultimately tragic relationship between de Gaulle and Pétain, which culminated in the old marshal's being condemned to life imprisonment for the treason of 1940 under the aegis of his former pupil, now become France's leader. Lacouture disproves the "persistent legend" (which I had always believed) that Pétain was made godfather to his namesake, Philippe de Gaulle. But he also suggests that the initial break between the two men in the 1920s and '30s came not so much over a matter of doc-

trine as over a dispute about the authorship of a book they had co-authored. De Gaulle is also shown to be more of an adherent to the Pétainesque school of fixed defense than the dedicated prophet of the war of movement that he has been held to be.

I have long felt that the Gaullist *mythomanes* of post-1945 have done history a disservice by inflating the second de Gaulle, the military thinker of the interwar period, into a greater figure than he really was. There is, for instance, in de Gaulle's much-quoted *The Army of the Future*, the small but important matter of the "fudged" paragraph on the significance of close-support airpower. This is not to be found in the original 1935 edition but was inserted in the post-1945 edition. In May 1940, however, de Gaulle was in full agreement with General Maurice Gamelin's mistaken strategy of pushing deep into Belgium, thereby doing precisely what Hitler wanted. In the two famous tank attacks (short and sharp) on which de Gaulle's reputation as a military commander largely rests, Lacouture shows him courageous to a fault, but fumbling. Lacouture acidly dismisses the romantic-minded General Edward Spears's account of de Gaulle's being hauled into the London-bound plane that June as "more like an after-dinner conversation at the Reform Club, scented with cigar smoke, than a piece of history."

The third de Gaulle, the Man of Free France, stands intact in Lacouture's pages—magnificent, indomitable, and impossible. Concerning de Gaulle and Churchill's relationship during this period, Lacouture sees Winston Churchill as "one of those Englishmen . . . who have a consuming, and at the same time slightly condescending, passion for France." (Lacouture is himself a trifle condescending toward the British, but not unfair.) The British were amazed by the ill will of de Gaulle's outfit and, once in a while, by its anti-Semitism, though de Gaulle himself



was always blameless here.

Of particular interest to American readers is Lacouture's view of de Gaulle's relationship with President Roosevelt. Churchill and de Gaulle were, he reckons "two dominant pugnacious characters expressing two different histories." But with FDR it was more than just "a clash of dominant personalities." Roosevelt convinced himself that de Gaulle intended to set himself up as a new Bonaparte. Of de Gaulle, Roosevelt said, "There is no man in whom I have less confidence." The feeling was mutual. Lacouture reproves Roosevelt not only for his resolute refusal to accept France's continuance as a great power but for the tasteless joke he made at de Gaulle's expense in Casablanca in 1943. Roosevelt had insisted that de Gaulle and his arch-rival for leadership of the Free French, General Henri-Honoré Giraud, be made to shake hands in front of the press cameras. Then, on repeated occasions, Roosevelt referred with manifest glee to the unwilling "Bride" and "Groom" and the "shotgun wedding." De Gaulle never forgot or forgave FDR's crassness. It was a

cancer that gnawed away at him, resulting in his constant distrust of *les Anglo-saxons* and leading to his withdrawal from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the 1960s. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was tarred with the same brush, and 20 years after Casablanca, almost to the day, de Gaulle vetoed British entry into the European Economic Community. (I may be prejudiced as the biographer of Macmillan, but I feel Lacouture has done Macmillan insufficient justice for having repeatedly saved his subject from the wrath of Churchill and Roosevelt during the war years.)

In Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lacouture tells us, de Gaulle found a much more sympathetic ally. "You are a man," de Gaulle declared with unwonted warmth after Eisenhower had made special, tactful dispensations for French troops to lead the way into Paris in August 1944. The old elephant remembered this too; after de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, the remaining years of Eisenhower's presidency were the most cordial of the Franco-American "special relationship."

As published in France, Lacouture's monumental biography ran to three thick volumes; skillful editing has reduced it to two for the "Anglo-Saxon" market. Volume II opens with de Gaulle celebrating the liberation of Paris in Notre Dame. Shots ring out; de Gaulle, unflinching, refuses to "yield to the panic of the crowd." The episode was symbolic of much that was to follow.

Gratitude, that least common of French public virtues, swiftly gave way to indignation as the Allies, not the Free French, liberated Brussels, and then even Strasbourg. This gave way to outrage, as FDR invited de Gaulle to meet him in Algiers (on France's *own* national territory!) and refused to have him invited to Yalta.

After little more than a year as president, trying to pull his shattered nation out of the morass of defeat and occupation, sickened by the wrangling of Third Republic politicians, de Gaulle abruptly turned on his heels and returned to

Colombey les Deux Églises. It was not a resignation, he explained; he had merely "handed back his mandate." Then, with a note of characteristic mysticism, he added that he owed it to France "to leave as a man morally intact." It was an act reminiscent of the scorpion stinging itself to death, Samson pulling down the temple upon his own head, and it was as great a miscalculation as that final act of self-destruction with which he rang down the curtain on the Gaullist era 23 years later, in 1969. "If only Napoleon had been able to take a year off, his whole fate would have been different," said de Gaulle in June 1946. That was about the limit of time, he reckoned, that *La Patrie* could do without him. He miscalculated. It would in fact be another 12 years, when France was on the verge of civil war over Algeria, before he would be called back.

Essentially the picture of the public man, Lacouture's biography is curiously (but also refreshingly) out of step with the current tell-all preoccupation with the subject's private life. We are given hints only that de Gaulle as a young man might have shared mistresses with his idol, Pétain (whose sexual appetites were legendary). About the only reference to family life comes during those agonizing years in the political wilderness, with the death in 1948 of his beloved daughter, Anne. De Gaulle adored this child, born a severely handicapped victim of Down's syndrome, and when she died he said to his wife, with touching simplicity: "Come, now she is like everybody else." Lacouture deals movingly with this display of gentleness on the part of an otherwise stern figure and shows de Gaulle admitting that, without the disabled little girl, "Perhaps I should not have done all that I have done. She made me understand so many things."

It was the Algerian War that returned him to power in a bitterly divided France in May 1958. Three times over the next three years de Gaulle brought France back from the edge of the abyss, but Algeria (to which Lacouture rightly devotes more than 100 pages) was not his finest hour. At

the zenith of his popularity, he lost vital months wavering over a policy. The savage, unwinnable war went on for another four years. A chapter well-titled "Zig-zagging to Peace" depicts de Gaulle infuriating friend and foe alike with his ambiguities, finally to pull out of Algeria on the worst terms. He was defeated by the persistent National Liberation Front as Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were to be later by the North Vietnamese—who learned valuable lessons on hard bargaining from the Algerians.

When de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, that wise old Washington owl Joseph Alsop declared that "old relations between France and her Allies are at an end." Haunted by the ghost of FDR, de Gaulle conducted his policy of French national interest convinced that America would sooner or later retreat behind its own frontiers. He slammed the door to Europe in the face of Macmillan, his friend and wartime savior. His relations with John Kennedy were bad, and with Lyndon Johnson terrible. There was a brief reconciliation with Nixon, but events overtook it.

By spring 1968, in the words of Lacouture's own newspaper, *Le Monde*, France was "bored"—a condition that in previous French history has often been followed by dramatic events. The "Events of May"—the riots in which workers joined with students—all but swept de Gaulle out of power. As he admitted to Premier Georges Pompidou, "For the first time in my life, my nerve failed me. I am not very proud of myself." In baffling circumstances, he flew off to Germany to throw himself on the mercy of General Jacques Massu, the army commander. What remains unclear is de Gaulle's real intentions behind this precipitous visit to Massu. Lacouture seems to think that he was seriously contemplating flight to his ancestral Ireland. But the granite-like Massu turned him around, and in Paris the day was won by an unexpected rallying to the Gaullist flag.

There have been few more dramatic moments in all of France's exciting his-

tory. Nevertheless, the old titan was discredited. The following year he undertook his fatal referendum on a minor issue (reform of the Senate). On it was staked his political survival. Predictably, he lost. His old colleague, André Malraux saw it as "suicide." Once again it was the desperate, terminal act of the scorpion, of Samson Agonistes.

Rather self-pityingly he regarded himself as being like "the character of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*; all I have brought back is a skeleton." The following November he died, two weeks before his 80th birthday. In his disdain for the men of the Fifth Republic (which he himself had created), he insisted on a private funeral, rather than have them trampling through the churchyard of his beloved Colombey.

Macmillan once said of de Gaulle, "He talks of Europe and means France." To him, France meant everything. In a world where patriotism had become almost a dirty word, he was a supreme patriot. Almost single-handedly, with his "certain idea of France," he brought the country up again from the nadir of 1940. Infuriating as he was, and sometimes surprising in his pettiness, he remains a man of rare grandeur. That no one can take from him.

To his great credit, Lacouture, though he criticizes and occasionally challenges, never detracts from that essential quality. If there is a major fault to be found with this biography, it is a notably French one—that special insularity that predisposes French historians to ignore what is written by foreigners and that often results in a serious impoverishment of native endeavor. But it has to be said, in sum, that this is a major work that rises admirably to the almost impossible challenge of its great subject. *Faute de mieux*, and that is likely to be the case for a long time, it will remain essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the tortuous history of France during the three-quarters of a century from 1914 to the present day.

What are we finally to make of de Gaulle's place in history nearly 25 years since his passing from the scene? In his

time, he caused great damage to the unity of the West. But, undeniably, the fact that France is once again a great power is largely due to de Gaulle and his influence. His stature probably saved the country from civil war in the aftermath of the 1944 liberation and almost certainly again in 1958 and 1961 during the Algerian War. He extricated France from the Algerian morass, albeit untidily and at enormous cost. His last legacy was to provide France with a strong, workable constitution to replace the anarchy of the Third and Fourth

Republics. It is an irony of fate that the principal beneficiary of this constitution should have been a leader of the Socialists he so despised, President François Mitterrand—while his own heirs stand divided over the legacy he left them.

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A Woman's Place Was in the Temple

A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE WEST. Vol. I: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints. Edited by Pauline Schmitt Pantel. Trans. by Arthur Goldhammer. Harvard. 572 pp. \$29.95

HER SHARE OF THE BLESSINGS: Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World. By Ross Shepard Kraemer. Oxford. 275 pp. \$24.95

If until the present century no one wrote a history of women in Greco-Roman antiquity, perhaps it was because there seemed so little to say. Women spent their lives then, and for centuries after, bearing, nursing, and raising children. Poor women performed other strenuous chores, as time and strength allowed. Richer women enjoyed their leisure; a few even read and wrote. But virtually all were excluded from civic life, unless they were closely related to men in power. The advent of Christianity brought little change, except in one respect: Women were excluded from the leading role they had formerly played in religion.

The notion that monotheism is superior to polytheism has kept us from seeing paganism as the social and moral equal of our own religions. Because pagan rites and myths were classified as mere superstition, the role that women played in an-

cient religion was largely overlooked. Recently, scholars have returned to ancient women some of the credit they deserve. But the diffuse nature of the ancient evidence has not made the task easy. Because most women did not write, there are no eyewitness narratives of what they thought and felt when they enacted their characteristic rituals.

We will probably never know what it was like to be a priestess in the Athens of the fourth century B.C. officiating at the sacrifices on behalf of the city or enacting the role of the bride of the god Dionysus. Nor are we likely to find out why (some 500 years later) a woman gave up her own name to become priestess of the goddess Demeter, charged with initiating the Roman Emperor Hadrian into the Eleusinian mysteries. Did women who bound ivy in their hair and carried ritual wands in honor of Dionysus experience the destructive ecstasy that makes Euripides' drama *The Bacchae* (406–05 B.C.) so terrifying? Or did they simply regard these and similar orgiastic rituals as holiday outings? Such evidence as we now have makes it impossible to provide authoritative answers.

Yet because the gods and goddesses, with few exceptions, required priests or priestesses of the same sex as themselves, we do know that women had a central role in the sacred life of many polytheistic com-