



DEGAULLE

THE REBEL 1890-1944

JEAN LACOUTURE

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1890-1944

Jean Lacouture

*Translated from the French
by Patrick O'Brian*



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DE GAULLE

THE REBEL

By the same author

De Gaulle

The Ruler 1945–1970

(to be published in 1991)

Pierre Mèndes-France

François Mauriac

Léon Blum

André Malraux

Ho Chi Minh

Preface

The Rebel, the first of three volumes of biography which I have devoted to General de Gaulle, appears here in its English edition with light cuts that disturb neither the balance nor the spirit of the original.

Much to my regret the publishers have found it necessary to condense the subsequent volumes, *The Politician* and *The Sovereign*, into a single volume, *The Ruler*. This cannot but affect the sense, in view of the fact that the book concerns a personality as complex and “controversial” as Charles de Gaulle.

JEAN LACOUTURE

June 1990

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With the publication of the second volume, *The Ruler*, the author will acknowledge his debt of thanks to all those who have consented to meet him or who have helped him. In the meantime, he expresses his gratitude to those who have helped him with his researches or who have very kindly read or clarified the manuscript: Catherine Grünblatt, Marie-Christine Gerber, Dominique Miollan, Martine Tardieu, Paul Flamand, Georges Bris, Jacques Nobécourt and Jean-Claude Guillebaud.

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*PUBLISHER'S NOTE: Sources are given in the notes at the back of the book; footnotes are the author's unless supplied by the translator, when they are indicated thus: (trs.).

I

THE IDEA

CHAPTER ONE

The Star

The year was 1905. Kaiser William II's landing at Tangier had made Europe shudder; and as Charles Péguy wrote, it opened "a new epoch in the history of my life, in the history of this country, and undoubtedly in the history of the world." In Paris, at the Jesuit college of the Immaculée-Conception, a fifteen-year-old boy named Charles de Gaulle, inspired perhaps by this event but without mentioning it, wrote this unusual account in a small brown notebook:

In 1930 Europe, angered by the government's ill will and insolence, declared war on France. Three German armies crossed the Vosges. The command of the strongest army was entrusted to General von Manteuffel. The Field-Marshal Prince Frederick Charles [of Prussia] took the head of the second. In France everything was very rapidly organized.

General de Gaulle was placed at the head of 200 000 men and 518 guns; General de Boisdeffre commanded an army of 150 000 men and 510 guns. On 10 February the armies took the field. De Gaulle quickly fixed upon his plan: he was first to save Nancy, then join hands with Boisdeffre and crush the Germans before they could unite, which would certainly have been disastrous for us.¹

And so on for twenty pages. This schoolboy in a general's hat described the conflict with astonishing exactness and authority – a conflict that he had taken care to place at a time when he would be the age of Napoleon at Wagram.

Even in the middle of his adolescence Charles de Gaulle saw himself at the head of the armies of France. Taking precedence over a Boisdeffre, the inheritor of one of the most considerable names in French military history, he defied Manteuffel and Frederick Charles, manoeuvring regiments and batteries with the skill of a second Maurice de Saxe. It could be said that in these days there were thousands of boys of fifteen who knew the order of battle at Austerlitz by heart who at some time or another took themselves for Turenne or Chanzly.* But what boy among them all, in an educational system which stressed the graduations of rank more than any other and in which humility was looked upon as a virtue of the strong, would have dared to offer his Jesuit schoolmasters so very striking a self-portrait?

At fifteen Charles de Gaulle already saw himself, already knew himself, as General de Gaulle. He saved Nancy, marched upon Strasburg, besieged Metz,

*Two legendary French generals: Turenne of the seventeenth century, Chanzly of the nineteenth. (trs.)

preserved the unfortunate Boisdeffre from disaster, bullied the government and drove it on, addressed Europe. Already he possessed that sense of symbol and gesture which was to make him the most dramatic of all public men in French history.

Just what did these premonitions amount to? Twenty-five years later, writing his *Le Fil de l'épée*,* Charles de Gaulle took care to let us know: "Is not that which Alexander called his 'hope', Caesar 'his fortune' and Napoleon 'his star' simply the certainty that a particular gift placed them in such close relations with reality that they could always master it?" Reality, or what strength of mind turns it into? In any event the "certainty" was emphatically there, and the "gift". One never becomes anything other than what one is. Imagination, energy, circumstances, do the rest.

Charles-André-Joseph-Marie de Gaulle was born between three and four o'clock in the morning of 22 November 1890 at his grandmother's house in Lille. He was the third child and the second son of Henri de Gaulle and Jeanne Maillot.** The child was christened two days later in the nearby parish church of Saint-André, a rather fine Carmelite building in the baroque style. The godmother was his aunt Lucie Maillot and the godfather his uncle Gustave de Corbie, a teacher at the Institut Catholique.

We must pause for a moment to consider these geographical facts rather than the particular middle-class aspects of the matter such as the highly respectable district in which the rue Princesse lay, the "good form" of the house, the beauty of the garden behind it, and the statuette of Notre-Dame-de-la-Foi in a niche on the façade of the courtyard.

But how far should one emphasize Lille, this place of his birth? In his *Mémoires de guerre* de Gaulle describes himself as "a little Lillois in Paris", a statement that draws him more distinctly towards the Nord than if he had written "a little Parisian from Lille".*** When they are asked today, Charles de Gaulle's relatives usually minimize the General's bonds with the Nord, and it is easy for them to do so by pointing out that the de Gaulles had been Parisians for four generations, whereas the General spent only the first weeks of his life at Lille.

But the Maillots, for their part, were most emphatically Lillois, and although one may be a de Gaulle one is nevertheless primarily one's mother's son. Lille was not only his cradle. It was also the capital of a region whose threatened frontier became a life-long obsession, a region in which he passed his holidays either in the rue Princesse, where the children came back for Easter and at the end of the summer, or at Wimereux, where their grandmother took a villa for them and their Corbie and Droulers cousins in August; a region in which he chose to begin his military career, at Arras; and finally a region in which he found a wife, at Calais.

This indwelling influence of the Nord was one of the essential factors in the General's being. As Paul-Marie de La Gorce expresses it so well, "All his life

**Le Fil de l'épée* was de Gaulle's book on military thought. See Chapter Seven. (trs.)

**The elder brother was Xavier; then came Marie-Agnès. (trs.)

***Lille is the capital of the department of the Nord. (trs.)

long, when he called to mind the French nation it was the people of the north of the country that he saw. When he spoke to the French, it was the French of the Nord that he had in mind."² That is to say, when he was thinking kindly of his countrymen. When he growled, "The French are clods,"* he was thinking more of those south of the Loire.** When, between June 1940 and April 1969, he called them to resistance or to reason, it was above all the others he was speaking to, the France of coffee rather than the France of wine. And this in spite of the strongly unified sense he had of the French community – from an historical point of view more than a geographical, perhaps.

A man of the Nord, then, who would be happy only in squalls; who would choose his house on the road by which the Frankish warriors came, blown by the wind of the great plains; who loathed the "gentle hills", what was called "la douce France", the self-indulgent living, the snug side of the southerners and their too-easy cordiality. A man of heavy weather, like that which he had known on the strand at Wimereux, when Henri de Gaulle, looking for his children, had to hold his top-hat with both hands. A man of storms, who as a writer continually turned to nautical metaphors, and who, on the eve of the great Algerian convulsion, with a kind of voracious laugh cried out to his ministers, "Hang on tight to the mast: she's going to roll!"

A Parisian too, however, like all those de Gaulles since that Jean-Baptiste who was an attorney in the court of parliament in the days of Maupeou.*** A Parisian of the seventh arrondissement, that capital of warriors, priests and jurists which stretches from the Champ-de-Mars to the Invalides and from Saint-François-Xavier to Sainte-Clotilde, the citadel of virtue and study, of arms and of the law – where Rodin rose up to add the arts. In these streets, these avenues, there is not a shop, not a bank, not a place of trade, except for a few cafés which allowed retired soldiers to confront one another in learned retrospective battles and colonels' sons to meet generals' daughters over a glass of lime-blossom tea.

De Gaulle's Paris was like Peking, or the Berlin of the beginning of the century or the Washington of the Founding Fathers – a city entirely given over to administration and to learning, a mandarin's city in which of the Three Estates only two were busy: the clergy and the nobilities of the legal robe, of science and of the sword. A community of churches, hospitals and barracks, of splendid gardens and hidden convents, where on the occasion of an election, that ultimate extravagance of the republican regime, the polling-booths saw the arrival, after High Mass, of long lines of monks and friars and cohorts of grizzled warriors in dark suits.

Paris, yes. But a Paris that was neither "gay" nor of commerce; not Zola's Paris, nor Offenbach's, nor even the Paris of Baron Haussmann. A Paris which, to paraphrase Pascal, was "only the capital of France", of a certain spiritual, organizing and military France that sprang fully armed from the brain of Henri de Gaulle's second son.

*The original is *veaux*. (trs.)

**As we shall see, he made some harsh remarks about towns in the south.

***Maupeou (1714–92) was made Chancellor of France in 1768 by Louis XV. (trs.)

When he came to write about this country of his birth de Gaulle said that in those days "France cultivated its melancholy, while at the same time it relished its wealth". Wealth and melancholy were certainly there. But France was nevertheless the centre of immense expectation. As the sociologist, Gustave Le Bon, one of the real masters of the day, said in his *Evolution des peuples*, "We are in one of those periods of history in which for a moment the heavens remain empty. From this fact alone, the world must change."

An age comparable to that of the Enlightenment? Yes, by antithesis: individualism, democracy and positivism, about to reach their highest point during the Dreyfus case, were already being undermined by those currents that Zeev Sternhell describes so powerfully in *La Droite révolutionnaire*³: the cult of violence, the mobilization of crowds, the decay of intellectualism, the upwelling of the subconscious. Of course the parts the actors had to play was not yet decided. The man who meant to defend the individual and the law called them both subtly in question; the man who worked for the overthrow of the radical republic was undermining the foundations of the positive intelligence upon which he claimed to build the future; the man who aimed at placing socialism at the service of nationalism only obscured the one by the other. It was a general confusion, this first rehearsal, in a still dark theatre, of an enormous tragedy of which the rise of European socialism and the opposition of the imperialisms in their various national forms were no more than the preludes.

A feverish time, a fertile time. Cézanne, Debussy and Claudel were on the threshold. Marx and Nietzsche were knocking at the door; but so were Drumont and Sorel,* the militants of the "cercle Proudhon". That tragic couple who were to ferment antisemitism in its modern form and to unleash a workers' populism so scornful of the law. And already Georges Vacher de Lapouge, the ideologist of naked ferocity, the true forerunner of Nazism, was pouring out his doctrine at the university of Montpellier.

The child Charles de Gaulle was not, as Flaubert said of Hannibal "clothed with the indefinable splendour of those who are destined for great undertakings". But the outlines of his character stood out very soon. Marie-Agnès, his very attentive elder sister knew him perhaps better than anyone else, and with whom he had to take less care of what he said than in the presence of his parents:

Charles was rather a difficult child. My father had a great deal of authority over him but my mother, on the other hand, had none whatsoever. He never obeyed her at any time. I remember a scene of his one day at Wimereux, at the house of an uncle. He must have been about seven. Charles said to our mother, "Maman, I should like to ride the pony." "No, you rode yesterday." "Then I'm going to be naughty." And straight away he threw his toys on the ground, shouted, cried, stamped.

*Edouard Drumont (1844-1917), was an anti-semitic writer and journalist; Georges Sorel (1847-1922) was the author of *Reflections on Violence* (1908), a widely read anarcho-syndicalist manifesto. (trs.)

Another time Charles was flinging books at Pierre's head.* The bedroom door was locked and he would not open it for our mother, who wanted to come in, being anxious about Pierre's crying. He was pugnacious, unruly and much given to teasing. When I was ten I was the big sister** who defended the little ones against Charles: Jacques was three years younger than he and Pierre six. One day when Charles was playing with us my father called him. "Charles, are you being good?" "Yes, Papa." "You are not bullying Jacques?" "No, Papa." "Nor Pierre?" "No, Papa." "Well then, here are two sous so that you will go on being kind to your brothers."⁴

Charles liked every kind of game – diabolo, croquet, flying a kite, playing ball, blind-man's buff. And he very often played with tin soldiers with his brothers. Xavier was the King of England and commanded the English forces; Jean de Corbie, our cousin, was Emperor of Russia, Charles was always the King of France and he always had the French army under his orders. There was never any question that it should be otherwise. He would summon Jacques: "You're the King of the Mysterious Island", and Pierre, "You're the Pope and you're in command of the Papal Guard!"

My father always made the five of us work during the holidays. Charles did fairly well. It was at school that he did no work (though from time to time he would be first in French and history). He didn't learn his German and he didn't always hand in his homework. What he really liked was writing poems and reading. When we were little we used to look at the Epinal pictures of *La Vie des saints* and *L'Histoire sainte*; we would gaze at them for hours on end – the martyrs delivered up to wild beasts, Jonah who had spent three days in the belly of a whale, Joseph sold by his brothers, the tower of Babel, Noah's ark.

The de Gaulle children, who had a subscription to the *Journal des voyages*, also read, like everyone else of their age, *Sans famille*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *La Prairie*, *Le Trappeur de l'Arkansas* and *L'Héritier de Charlemagne*.

Oh, what a man our father was! Witty, charming, wonderful. He knew how to talk to children on their own level. He used to sing rounds with us, and he taught us traditional songs. During the holidays, in the Nord, he often took us to the pastry-cook's and there we ate quantities of cakes. Then he would say "Confess", and we would admit the number we had taken. He also used to say, "Every time you take a cake, you save a sou." (Because cakes cost three sous each in Paris and only two in the Nord.) We were not very fond of going for walks, except with him. He would say "Fall in by the door", and we would set out happily, gathered round him. During our walk we would stop at the country ale-houses to eat cheese and drink cider or beer.

Henri de Gaulle's grandchildren still remember his very great kindness, his lively

*The youngest of the brothers.

**Two years older than Charles.

good nature and his gift for teaching, particularly the children of Marie-Agnès, with whom he spent the last years of his life at Le Havre, in the thirties, always benign, ready for anything, full of consideration, highly cultured, amusing himself by solving problems in mathematics as though they were crossword puzzles.

Although memories of Wimereux and Lille recur so often in Marie-Agnès' reminiscences, the de Gaulle children were not systematically confined to the Nord. In the last days of the century their father had bought a house near Nontron in the Dordogne for a song; it was called La Ligerie and it was an old place built for some rural notability, and its solid rounded masonry dovecote gave it something of the look of a turreted manor buried among its trees. They set off for La Ligerie in the middle of July, to stay a full month. And there, under the great trees and in the coppices, "King Charles" did not confine himself to making his brothers carry out manoeuvres: he called up the children of the neighbourhood, to form the perfect infantrymen for the great plans of the twelve-year-old strategist.

In Paris Henri de Gaulle liked taking his children to the Arc de Triomphe or to Napoleon's tomb in the Invalides, and sometimes, on a Sunday, as far as Le Bourget or Stains, where he had fought during the last months of 1870. By way of celebrating Charles's birthday, he took him to see one of the first performances of *L'Aiglon*.^{*} The confrontation of Sarah Bernhardt and Lucien Guitry left an indelible impression on Charles's adolescent mind.

The few cuffs exchanged between the brothers and the demands of this imperious little boy had practically no effect on the affectionate, equable atmosphere in which Charles passed his childhood. He was not the cleverest of Henri de Gaulle's children. Xavier, the oldest boy, seemed much more gifted. He became, it may be added, an engineer in the government Department of Mines before being Consul-General at Geneva.

Jacques, the third son, was also an engineer: but this was before he fell victim to a sleeping sickness epidemic that entirely paralysed him at the age of thirty. He was bed-ridden, dumb and racked with pain for twenty years; and perhaps he was the brother most loved by Charles, who seems to have suffered almost as much from Jacques' infirmity as from that which some years later was to strike his own child, the third. As for Pierre, he was to be found at the General's side in 1944, the president of the Paris municipal council, senator for the Seine, and lastly Deputy for Paris.

No one could bear witness to the efficacy of the various forms of Catholic education in France at the turn of the century more than Charles de Gaulle: he was taught first by the Christian Brothers, then by the Jesuits of the Collège de l'Immaculée Conception, then by those of Antoing in Belgium, and finally by the masters of the Collège Stanislas.

In October 1900 Charles de Gaulle went on to the college where his father was to become prefect of studies, to work in the sixth form, the form in which the boys began to learn Latin. In the photograph taken before the school broke up for the winter holidays he is to be seen in the third row, looking somewhat retiring,

^{*}*L'Aiglon* and *Cyrano de Bergerac* are the two celebrated plays of Edmond Rostand (1868-1914). (trs.)