



CHARLES DE GAULLE

A BIOGRAPHY

DON COOK

CHARLES DE GAULLE

by the world leaders who knew him:

Churchill: "A great man? Why he's selfish, he's arrogant, he thinks he's the center of the universe. . . . He . . . Yes, he's a great man!"

Roosevelt: "I am fed up with de Gaulle. I am absolutely convinced that he has been and is now injuring our war effort, and that he is a dangerous threat to us."

Stalin: "General de Gaulle is really a simple man."

Eisenhower: "I offered him everything it was possible to offer, very far toward his requests. But he wouldn't have it. It was all or nothing for him."

Kennedy: "The strategy of de Gaulle, which I do not quite understand, needs a certain tension between France and the United States. Apparently he thinks that only this tension can give the Europeans the will to think for themselves instead of relying lazily on American dollars and political leadership. But we are going to give less and less occasion for France to create this tension."

Johnson: "When de Gaulle winds up to pitch, I step out of the batter's box."

Charles de Gaulle on his role as leader of France:

1941: "Our greatness and our strength consists solely in intransigence over what concerns the rights of France."

1969: "I have tried to set France upright to the end of the world. Have I failed? It will be for others to see later on."

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DE GAULLE

BOOKS BY DON COOK

CHARLES DE GAULLE
TEN MEN AND HISTORY
THE WAR LORDS: EISENHOWER
(*Edited by Field Marshal Lord Carver*)
FLOODTIDE IN EUROPE

CHARLES DE GAULLE

A Biography



DON COOK

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Third Impression

TO THE FRIENDSHIP AND MEMORY OF
CHARLES E. BOHLEN
AMERICAN AMBASSADOR TO FRANCE, 1962–68

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . ."

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All my life I have thought of France in a certain way. This is inspired by sentiment as much as by reason. The emotional side of me tends to imagine France, like the princess in the fairy stories or the Madonna in the frescoes, as dedicated to an exalted and exceptional destiny. Instinctively I have the feeling that Providence has created her either for complete successes or for exemplary misfortunes. If, in spite of this, mediocrity shows in her acts and deeds, it strikes me as an absurd anomaly, to be imputed to the faults of Frenchmen, not to the genius of the land. But the positive side of my mind also assures me that France is not really herself unless in the front rank; that only vast enterprises are capable of counterbalancing the ferments of dispersal which are inherent in her people; that our country, as it is, surrounded by the others, as they are, must aim high and hold itself straight, on pain of mortal danger. In short, to my mind, France cannot be France without greatness.

CHARLES DE GAULLE

I

PREPARATION



ONE

A STUDY IN POWER

There is but one theme in the life of Charles de Gaulle, and that is power. His great agonizing devotion to France, his dreams and his exhortations to greatness, would have amounted to little more than the philosophical superpatriotism of a soldier-intellectual had he never been able to translate it all into the exercise of power.

From his earliest years in school and the French Army, he devoted himself consciously, instinctively and almost exclusively in everything that he did and the histories he so avidly read to the study of power, examining its roots and pondering its techniques, preparing for power, reaching for power and demonstrating his ability to exercise power at every opportunity and at whatever level presented itself. There were ups and downs in his life, to be sure. But there was no diversion from this single-minded absorption with power—no byways of intellectual exploration or curiosity, no change of direction, no side interests or lively social life, no diverting friends or cronies, no avocation or hobbies or devotion to sport, certainly no scandal and no pursuit of pleasures. There is a joylessness about de Gaulle's life—for him the pursuit of power was much too serious a matter for the intrusion of laughter or pleasure.

When France laid down its arms and asked for an armistice from the Germans in 1940, power lay at General de Gaulle's feet, and he was ready for it. He had not the slightest doubt, uncertainty, hesitation or surprise that he was a man of destiny. Empty though the vessel might be, he would fill it with his own extraordinary personality and ability, a self-confidence that far exceeded mere egotism, and above all a readiness in the name of France to demonstrate power and invent power where it had ceased to exist.

France throughout its history has moved in and out of national tragedy, declared wars and made peace, changed its constitutions, altered its foreign policy and shifted its allegiances under the personal dominance and leadership of one man—who often has emerged from nowhere. It is a nation that goes through

periodic bouts of abrupt and often profound change in order to survive and progress. For General de Gaulle in 1940, the assumption of the mantle of French destiny was as natural as putting on his Army greatcoat. As in the past, French history again required a leader to come to the rescue of the nation, to revive France, to restore France's honor and regain for her a place among the victorious powers of Europe. De Gaulle's origins were no more obscure than those of Napoleon, and his intellect and ability to seize and exercise power ruthlessly was every bit as strong. In the past, "*l'État, c'est moi*" had been the watchword of the kings of France. However egocentric it might seem to the rest of the world, for Charles de Gaulle it was a matter of simple historical necessity to become the State.

This French experience is the antithesis of Anglo-Saxon democratic history, in which constitutional stability is paramount and change comes through continuity and evolution. For Anglo-Saxons, this made the de Gaulle phenomenon all the more difficult to accept and comprehend. Winston Churchill, a nineteenth-century romantic devoted to France, did understand it and at the outset embraced de Gaulle. Franklin D. Roosevelt could not. General de Gaulle was anachronistic, out of place in the American Century, and a little absurd. He was a brigadier general with few troops, an enormous ego and an uncooperative nature. France was prostrate, and that was that.

Roosevelt dismissed de Gaulle contemptuously with the oft-repeated remark, "Sometimes he thinks he's Joan of Arc and sometimes he thinks he's Clemenceau." It was beyond his comprehension that this austere general, whom few men had ever heard of before even in France, could create power for himself with nothing but his own rectitude, intelligence, personality and sense of destiny. In particular, Roosevelt had never before in all his political life been up against the power of intransigence. Steeped in politics, FDR was probably the greatest political manipulator in American history. But General de Gaulle refused to be manipulated. It was incomprehensible (and indeed often totally unreasonable) that a French general in the middle of a war could be so unyielding with his allies, so petty, so haughty, so deliberately antagonistic, troublesome and uncooperative. The great Churchill was prepared to play the Loyal Lieutenant and subjugate his national interests to the greater interests of the war effort as defined by Roosevelt. But de Gaulle's destiny was to fight for French interests, not subjugate them to the Anglo-Saxons. Intransigence was his prime weapon, often his only weapon, and it remained his prime instrument of power to the end of his days.

*

How does mere ambition in a man harden into a sense of destiny, and what gives a man a feel for power and an appetite for power? General de Gaulle, for all his vivid writing, discloses very little of himself apart from rather melancholy introspections about France and other subjects. He decided early on to enter the Army, convinced as many Frenchmen were at the turn of the century that another war with Germany was inevitable. The Army was a place where a man could exercise command and power, even at a young age and with a low rank, and perhaps even find destiny.

De Gaulle was perfectly suited in personality, temperament, intellect, courage and patriotic conviction to the molding of a military career. He was a loner from the start, all his life ready to embrace the loneliness of command that is a hallmark of great generals. He always remained remote, aloof, distant from his fellow officers. He was moody, brooding, dour and intensely intellectual in his approach to his career and the challenges and problems of military life. He devoured military history, always seeking out the details of the commanders who challenged the conventional, commanders who were original and made a success of disobeying. From the outset of his career, even when commanding platoons or companies on exercises, he made a habit of doing it his way, against the concepts and even the orders of those above him. He constantly sought to demonstrate his own independence and superiority at whatever level he was operating. His service records and stories about him from his early Army days are replete with tales and complaints about the arrogance, condescension, superiority and disregard of the opinions of others that marked his entire life. He was not popular and promotions were painfully slow. Nevertheless, on the premise that power begets power, de Gaulle continued to push and thrust at every opportunity to acquire power by demonstrating power, even on occasion deliberately putting his career in the French Army at risk. But his strong intellect and total dedication to his profession could not be ignored. Difficult and ambitious he was, but always exceptional.

On one occasion in those early years, a young fellow officer ventured in a rare moment of conversational reflection when they were out on a maneuver to say to de Gaulle: "*Mon cher ami*, I am going to say something that will probably make you smile, but I have a curious feeling that you are heading for a very great destiny." To this, de Gaulle simply gazed out into the distance and replied with toneless thought: "*Oui . . . moi aussi.*" (Yes, I do too.)

In 1927, when he was thirty-seven and still only an Army captain, de Gaulle's pursuit of destiny developed decisively. He distilled and synthesized his historical readings and philosophical broodings about leadership and power into a remarkable series of lectures that he delivered to France's highest war college, the École Supérieure de Guerre, which were subsequently published in a slim little volume entitled *Le Fil de l'Épée* (The Edge of the Sword). At the time, it would have taken a very large stretch of anyone's imagination to guess that these lectures would turn out to be a kind of catechism in power by France's most dominant man of the century. The lectures were no great success with his audience, for all their brilliance of analysis, like much else in de Gaulle's prewar career. But they marked an annealing process in de Gaulle, a point at which he had equipped himself and rooted himself in a strong personal philosophy of power, along with the intellect and personality to go with it. His approach was strictly authoritarian and military—nothing whatsoever to do with politics, economics or social theory. As de Gaulle then moved slowly upward in his career in the 1930s, in staff assignments at the Ministry of War, his utter confidence in his own feel for power grew along with his disillusion with and contempt for politics and politicians. His task in those days was the overhaul of French war mobilization plans in the face of the revived menace from Nazi Germany. But his personal frustrations in trying to get action