
Pro Rege

Volume 47 | Number 4

Article 6

June 2019

Charles de Gaulle: A Life of Consequence

Jack Van Der Slik

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

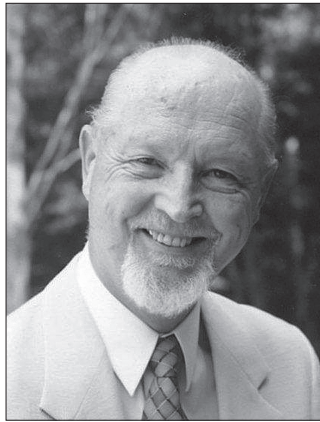
Recommended Citation

Van Der Slik, Jack (2019) "Charles de Gaulle: A Life of Consequence," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 47: No. 4, 21 - 26.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol47/iss4/6

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Charles de Gaulle: a Life of Consequence



by Jack Van Der Slik

De Gaulle. Julian Jackson. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. xl and 887. ISBN 9780674987210. Published in the United Kingdom as *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle*.

In France today, Charles de Gaulle is everywhere. At a recent count, more than 3600 localities in France have a public space—street, avenue, square, roundabout—named after him. His statue is prominent in Paris and elsewhere. The official photo of Emmanuel Macron, the current French president, shows him in front of an open book, Charles de Gaulle's *War Memoirs*. Reminders of de Gaulle and his impact upon the French people remain palpable in all of France.

Dr. Jack Van Der Slik is Professor Emeritus of Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois-Springfield.

Most readers of this review are, like me, captives of the English language. My generation and those who are younger know about World War II and its consequences from countless renditions about it in the English language. I and others like me are little informed by a sturdy literature in French about France and French perspectives on the politics and outcomes of that war. For these readers *De Gaulle*, both the book and the man, are best accessible in scholarly English from Julian Jackson, a distinguished professor of history at Queen Mary University of London. His profile on the university's website (www.qmul.ac.uk) says that beginning with a study of the 1930s' depression in France, and in all his subsequent research, Jackson has focused on French politics following that time. *De Gaulle* represents a culmination of his productive scholarship.

My review essay focuses upon Charles de Gaulle's remarkable political career and how he shaped and reshaped the political machinery of France. Paying close attention to Jackson's rendition and analysis, I will forgo discussing his careful recounting of de Gaulle's handling of policy change for France regarding NATO, the European Economic Community or relationships with the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Although not beyond the scope of Jackson's rich engagement with de Gaulle, my focus is upon the political processes through which de Gaulle managed to gather, manipulate, and exercise unifying resources for leadership in a factionalized nation.

De Gaulle's life history is a difficult challenge

to summarize briefly. Jackson's book approaches a thousand pages. Wikipedia provides a lengthy article of 63 printed pages on de Gaulle. Let me set forth some of the essentials. Born in 1890, de Gaulle grew up in an upper middle-class family, the third of five children, in a devout Catholic household. His father was a professor of history at a Jesuit college. Charles received a military school education and quickly rose to be a company commander in the French army during World War I. He was captured by the Germans in March 1916 and held as a prisoner for 32 months. After the war he remained an army officer under Marshal Philippe Pétain during the 1920s and held a staff position interfacing between military planning and civil government during the 1930s. In 1937 he received command of a tank regiment. In 1940 he saw action as a division commander, and he led his tanks in forcing a brief withdrawal by oncoming German forces. He was promoted to brigadier general in June 1940, a rank he claimed for the rest of his life. In the middle of tempestuous government changes, de Gaulle was appointed minister for "Defense and War" by Paul Reynaud, who briefly became prime minister of France on June 5. In mid-June de Gaulle was on a mission to London while the government in Paris disintegrated. Thereafter Reynaud resigned, and Pétain became prime minister and sought an armistice with Nazi Germany that was signed on June 21, 1940. The surrendering French government, headed by Pétain, established itself in the small French city of Vichy. There, a fragment of the French parliament authorized a new constitution, dissolved itself, and allowed Pétain to exercise full executive powers in behalf of the nation. From then until the war's end, de Gaulle was the self-proclaimed head of the "Free French" and settled in London. By agreement with the BBC, de Gaulle denounced the armistice on behalf of the Free French. On June 28, de Gaulle was recognized as the leader of the Free French by Winston Churchill's administration, and London became the European headquarters of the Free French movement.

During World War II, Roosevelt and Churchill had prickly interactions with de Gaulle. However, the Allied military under Eisenhower established cooperative agreements with the French military

in North Africa. Eisenhower oversaw the North African invasion and made peace with the commander of the French forces, Admiral François Darlan. Darlan successfully ordered all the French forces to lay down arms in return for Vichy control over the civilian governments in the French colonies. After Darlan's death at the hands of a French monarchist, the North African French accommodated to Eisenhower. De Gaulle famously shook hands with Darlan's successor, General Henri Gerard, and the French military joined the Africa campaign against the Germans. Subsequently, when Eisenhower led the Normandy invasion of Europe, the United States equipped French forces that were organized for a coordinating invasion of southern France. De Gaulle became the accepted leader of the French Committee of National Liberation. After successful invasions, in late August 1944 Paris was liberated, the German forces withdrew from the city, and Eisenhower, as the Allied Supreme Commander, put his French divisions in the vanguard for the liberation of Paris. Promptly on the scene, De Gaulle relit the flame at the tomb of the unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe, on August 26, for millions of liberated Parisians.

Jackson elucidates how de Gaulle captured control of both Paris and the nation. De Gaulle came before a body of resistance leaders (Consul National de la Résistance, or CNR) and there launched into an emotional speech: "Paris! Paris outraged! Paris broken! Paris martyred! [Long pause] – but Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its people with the help of the armies of France, with the help and assistance of the whole of France, of that France which fights, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France" (326).

Jackson immediately comments on de Gaulle's words: "What is striking about the rest of the speech, after this stirring opening, was the deliberate absence of any reference either to the Allies or to those resisters (some of them present) who had risked their lives so that they could live this moment. After the speech, [de Gaulle was asked] if he would now declare that the Republic was restored. De Gaulle's curt reply expressed the thought behind every action he had taken

since arriving in Paris: "The Republic has never ceased to exist.... Vichy was always, and remains, null and void. I am President of the Republic" (326-327). After that, in a series of moves, de Gaulle consolidated his authority by proclaiming the continuity of the Third French Republic and becoming the accepted leader of France, not only within the nation but in relation to the Allied leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. Recognition was accorded by the United States and Britain on October 23, 1944. On November 11, the anniversary of the World War I armistice, the French were admitted to the European Consultative Commission, tasked to discuss the status

of Germany after the end of the war. However France was allowed no part in the Yalta and Potsdam conferences by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union.

In October 1945, after the war in Europe ended, the French electorate chose a Constituent Assembly that would draft a constitution for a Fourth French Republic. On November 13, it made de Gaulle the head of the government. That was a government destined for failure. The Assembly was divided with three major factions: the Communists with 158 seats, the Christian Democrats with 152 and the Socialists with 142. Despite nearly unanimous votes for de Gaulle as head of the government, policy wrangling was endless. By the end of December, "the deliberations of the commission drafting the constitution, dominated by the Socialists, were heading in a direction which seemed to weaken executive power even more than in the Third Republic" (380). Ruefully contemplating the prospects ahead for governing, de Gaulle decided upon an abrupt resignation on January 20, 1946. This act of protest did not evoke appeals to de Gaulle from the factionalized Assembly to "return on his own terms." Instead the Communists exulted: "We got rid of de Gaulle without frightening the population" (384).

During what might have been a permanent withdrawal by de Gaulle from the French political

Jackson elucidates how de Gaulle captured control of both Paris and the nation.

scene, the Fourth French Republic held sway from 1946 to 1958. The French economy, capitalized in part by the United States Marshall Plan funding, grew, and its cities prospered. However, the government produced 21 different ruling administrations over a bumpy 12- year history. De Gaulle contented himself in mostly quiet withdrawal, during which he wrote and published a three-volume *Memoir* series (1940-42; 1942-44; 1944-1946). As the government lost or gave up pieces of its empire in Asia and Africa, successive admin-

istrations could not resolve issues in French Algeria about governance as a part of France or independent from France. The French army in Algeria backed a movement to defeat separation.

In the spring of 1958, after months of governmental fluidity, President René Coty called upon de Gaulle to lead a deep reform of the French governing system. De Gaulle appeared before the parliament on June 1, "asking for full powers to govern by decree for six months, the suspension of parliament during that period and authorization for the government to draft a new constitution to be submitted by a referendum for popular approval. De Gaulle gave not the slightest indication of how he intended to use these powers and left as soon as he finished." Following a six-hour debate, "the Chamber voted: de Gaulle was invested by 329 to 224 votes" (471).

As the last prime minister of the Fourth Republic, de Gaulle had six months of unchecked power to undertake reforms. These "resulted not only in the drafting of a new constitution, the implementation of a major financial plan and several new initiatives in foreign policy but also a legislative frenzy resulting in the promulgation of over 300 ordinances covering the most eclectic range of subjects.... What made their rapid implementation possible were the unique conditions under which de Gaulle had six months of untrammelled power to govern without parliament" (484).

After a petite team of de Gaulle devotees were assigned to create a new constitution, De Gaulle personally chaired a small ministerial committee to refine the draft. However, "Our only knowledge

of the debates [in the committee] comes from subsequent recollections of the committee members" (488). The discussion of revisions was dominated by de Gaulle, who "had a gift for suggestive obscurity." The new France would be a community, not a federation or confederation. In that community, "All key areas of sovereignty—foreign-policy, defense, finance—remained with France; and the states retained the French flag and the national anthem. The result was less than many African leaders wanted" (490).

In the referendum that followed, there was huge participation and "yes" votes from 79 per cent of the metropolitan French voters. Numbers are not reported for Algeria and fourteen member territories. When the new constitution went into effect on October 4, 1958, the Gaullists had the largest party, but not a majority, in the parliament. In December, de Gaulle was elected to a seven-year term of office by an electoral college of 80,000 voters created by the new constitution: "There were other candidates but de Gaulle's election by 78 per cent of the electors was a foregone conclusion" (505). The transfer of executive authority took place on January 8, 1959.

Despite de Gaulle's rhetoric in Algeria in June 1958 that asserted *Vive l'Algerie française!* (Long live French Algeria!), he advocated change in 1959 via self-determination. By referendum, Algerians could choose independence, integration with metropolitan France, or "the government of Algeria by the Algerians, supported by the aid of France and in close union with her" (518). Change was opposed by the ethnic French in Algeria. In January 1960, in what is remembered as Barricades Week, the ethnic French (*pièdes noirs*) tried an insurgency that de Gaulle was able to quiet with a dramatic speech asking for unity. In June, de Gaulle successfully defused a challenge from the FLN (National Liberation Front), the nativist movement seeking complete Algerian independence. At the same time, "The French government revised its statutes of the Community to allow membership to be compatible with independence. All France's sub-Saharan African possessions had acquired independence by the end of July 1960" (525). Half a year later, "in the referendum on 8 January, 1961, some 75

per cent of voters approved de Gaulle's Algerian policy" (529), and De Gaulle's designs for Algeria continued to evolve. At a press conference in April, de Gaulle spoke of "a solution by which Algeria would cease to belong to her [France]" (530). Briefly, there were fears that a military insurrection would reverse de Gaulle's imperative; but De Gaulle took to television to forbid the French army in Algeria from following their recalcitrant generals: "The effect of de Gaulle's speech had been electrifying. The thousands of conscript soldiers who comprised the bulk of the army in Algeria listened on their transistor radios." Without support from the rank-and-file, the generals went into hiding: "The attempted coup was over" (532-533).

The rending of Algeria from France was not a neat and tidy process. What would be remembered as the Evian talks began on May 20. They were briefly suspended in June, then resumed in July, when there were demonstrations and police violence. An attempt on de Gaulle's life via a car bomb occurred in September, but secret negotiations continued into the new year: "By the end, the French had abandoned almost every negotiating position they had started with nine months earlier.... On the thorny issue of the rights of the Europeans, the compromise reached was that for three years the *pièdes noirs* could hold double citizenship before deciding whether to become full Algerian citizens.... On March 18, [1962] de Gaulle announced the signing of the Evian accords on French television. In April, they were approved in a referendum by 91 per cent of those voting" (543). On July 1, more than 99 per cent of Algerians voted for their independence. Before the year ended an estimated 680,000 *pièdes noirs* departed Algeria for France.

In a rather tart appraisal, Jackson characterized the Algerian resolution as less than a French and/or de Gaulle achievement:

De Gaulle's "granting" of Algerian independence, while avoiding civil war in France, is often counted as one of his greatest achievements. This judgement needs to be qualified. He did not "grant" independence: it was wrested from him. And he only partially avoided civil war.... De Gaulle's caution could be explained by the

need gradually to 'sell' the policy to the army and the French population, but if anything the steady retreat, and the twists and turns of policy, exacerbated the army's sense of betrayal.... [P]erhaps no one could have done any better, but it is hard to see that anyone could have done much worse.... De Gaulle's achievement, then, was less to have "granted" independence than to have persuaded people that that is what he had done; to make them believe that he had controlled the process; and to create a compelling narrative that explained France's disengagement from Algeria and turned it into a victory rather than a defeat. (545)

It is Jackson's sense that in the spring of 1962, de Gaulle, having proclaimed a resolution to the Algeria matter, "it seemed that 'normal' politics might resume" (547), meaning that the old divisiveness in the parliament and challenges to de Gaulle's exalted vision of France in international affairs would recur in French politics. In August a right-wing movement (OAS: *Organisation armée secrète*) fostered an unsuccessful assassination attempt upon de Gaulle and his wife. (For a somewhat fictionalized treatment in book and film, see *The Day of the Jackal*.) One of the assassins, an extreme right-wing anti-Gaullist, was executed. Noting the event as politically timely, de Gaulle "saw an opportunity to capitalize on the emotion aroused by the event to carry out a constitutional change he had been planning for some months" (558). What he wanted was a constitutional change to elect himself as president by universal suffrage. In a series of actions that overwhelmed his parliamentary opponents, de Gaulle called for a referendum and new elections to follow. De Gaulle got his way with 62 per cent support from the French voters. Parliamentary elections followed in November 1962: "[T]he Gaullists triumphed. For the first time in the history of French democratic politics, one party came within a few votes of an overall majority in parliament. The shortfall was easily made up by a few independent conservatives on the center right. The referendum and election put de Gaulle in a position of complete political dominance...." (563).

As the last prime minister of the Fourth Republic, de Gaulle had six months of unchecked power to undertake reforms.

Jackson is thorough and detailed about de Gaulle's pursuit of grandeur in behalf of France. In 1960 France successfully tested a nuclear device at a Sahara site, making itself a peer with the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain. In 1962 in an exchange of visits with Konrad Adenauer, "it was as if de Gaulle was granting Germany its absolution" for the historic wars of the two countries (584). In 1964 de Gaulle granted recognition to the People's Republic of China despite the growing United States engagement in Vietnam. But sometimes de Gaulle overreached.

In the Middle East crisis between Egypt and Israel, de Gaulle sought a four-nations' forum, including France, to bring about a settlement. Instead, the settlement was confirmed

by agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States. Then President Lyndon Johnson scoffed: "the four Great Powers? Where the hell are the other two?" (685). In 1967, when de Gaulle visited Canada, he ignored the federal government in Ottawa. Focusing instead upon Québec and giving a major address in Montréal, he ended with "*Viva le Québec libre, Viva le Canada français, Vive la France*" (687). Ottawa was offended, and De Gaulle canceled his visit to Ottawa and promptly flew back to Paris.

In May 1968, simmering issues in Parisian universities led to street riots, heavy-handed police violence, and solidarity strikes by trade unions, "and at its peak on 25 May there were several million workers on strike" (720). De Gaulle's plan to call for a referendum to calm the storm was flatly rejected. In fact, "there was a cultural abyss between him and the protesters, whose celebration of individualism, personal freedom and self-expression was the antithesis of his austere patriotism, in which individualism was sublimated in the service of the nation" (725). But Georges Pompidou, the prime minister, was able to nurture negotiations between labor and business leaders, who had seen enough of social unrest. On May 30, de Gaulle delivered a plan by radio that would dissolve parliament and call for parliamentary elections while blam-

ing the Communists for the unrest:

The timing of the speech was perfect. Public opinion had turned against the students; Pompidou had held his nerve and found a way of negotiating a solution; the unions were keen to find a deal; plans for a Gaullist demonstration on May 30 were underway. The new element was Pompidou's idea of dissolution, which meant that conservatives, traumatized by the disorder, were offered a chance to express themselves through the ballot box. For all these reasons, the crisis was probably close to a resolution." (735)

De Gaulle was once more rewarded by the electorate. Some major opponents were defeated: "[T]he Gaullist party...won 293 parliamentary seats, giving it a substantial overall majority, something never previously achieved by any single party in the history of French democracy" (737).

De Gaulle insisted upon going to the French electorate in 1969 with a referendum to restructure the French Senate: "[T]he idea was that instead of being a second legislative chamber... the Senate would become a consultative body representative of economic and social forces. This was an idea that had its roots in the corporatist thinking much in vogue in inter-war Europe.... [T]he proposed reform envisioned the creation of regional assemblies with powers of economic investment and infrastructure..." (748). Curiously, de Gaulle, after establishing a date for a referendum, April 27, 1969, then began to doubt the prospects for its approval. In early April, anticipating defeat, de Gaulle decided upon his departure from office. It would be dramatic. In an April 25 television address, de Gaulle announced that he would leave office if the referendum were not approved. By the evening of the 27th, the no votes prevailed. At midnight a message was released, saying that the General would cease exercising his "functions as President of the Republic" on the very next day at noon. Promptly, de Gaulle departed from office and any further participa-

tion in the nation's policy and political activities.

Very quickly, de Gaulle put himself behind a curtain of privacy. In secrecy, de Gaulle and his wife departed to Ireland for a series of visits to remote places. After a year of near anonymity, he made a quiet retreat to his home in Colombey: "De Gaulle never set foot in Paris again, apart from an incognito visit for the first communion of his granddaughter Anne" (757). In private, he worked assiduously on a planned trilogy, *Memories of Hope*. Only the first volume was published in October 1970, a rendition of the years 1958 to 1962. After initial progress on the second volume, de Gaulle died from a ruptured aneurysm on November 9, 1970. The French people responded with an outpouring of grief. Jackson notes that thereafter "the de Gaulle myth assumed unstoppable proportions" (768). Celebrations of de Gaulle's life were renewed in France in 1990 and 2010. Expressing his concluding judgment about de Gaulle, Jackson said, "He saved the honour of France" (777).

Jackson is to be thanked and commended for the deep scrutiny he has provided about France and the French in the 20th century, in addition to his penetrating engagement with de Gaulle's life. Jackson provides an unusual scholarly touch as an appendix to the book. There, Jackson details in thumbnail biographies more than 100 contemporaries of de Gaulle who were significant to the era in which de Gaulle was the dominant figure. Jackson's thorough documentation of the de Gaulle life fills 58 pages of footnote details. Often admiring of de Gaulle, he is not overawed. Frequently he characterizes the hero's missteps, and he is candid about de Gaulle's cruel disregard at times for those whose lives he wounded. With all, Jackson has given our 21st-century audience a rich account in English of a singular, towering figure prominent in World War II events who withstood the challenge of Communism by fostering democracy in Europe thereafter. Those events and their outcomes significantly shaped today's political world and the peace in which we presently live.