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Sudhir Hazareesingh, *In the Shadow of the General: Modern France and the Myth of De Gaulle*.

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Review by Michael S. Neiberg, US Army War College (neiberg102@gmail.com).

Many years ago, an undergraduate identified Charles de Gaulle on my modern French history midterm exam as “the man who was a general and a president before he was an airport.” Her confusion was forgivable given the omnipresence of de Gaulle throughout France. More streets, squares, and public facilities are named for him than for any other Frenchman. When not sightseeing at a place Charles de Gaulle or rambling down an avenue de Gaulle, a visitor to France is likely to see one of the thousands of metal placards affixed to public buildings bearing his legendary appeal for resistance of 18 June 1940. De Gaulle remains, by a wide margin, the most admired Frenchman, as shown by repeated public surveys; a recently opened *Historial Charles de Gaulle* drew massive crowds to the Parisian military museum inside Les Invalides.<sup>1</sup>

Like so much about de Gaulle, this unparalleled adulation is, paradoxically enough, both surprising and inevitable. Surprising because of his unpopularity upon his departure from public life in the wake of widespread public demonstrations in May 1968. De Gaulle seemed out of touch to most Frenchmen in those days, thoroughly confounded by the country’s changes in the preceding decade, and a symbol of an aging generation that was out of answers. After losing a national referendum in 1969, he left politics, not quite in disgrace, but clearly with a sense of national, perhaps even personal, relief. A year and a half later, he was dead.

Despite his unpopularity at the end of his life, the glorification of de Gaulle was nevertheless inevitable because of all he had done for France since assuming the leadership of the Free French movement in 1940. Although few heard his now-famous *Appel du 18 juin* (his British hosts did not think enough of him even to record the address), de Gaulle held tenaciously to what he later called “a certain idea of France.” That certain idea linked him to France in ways no one could deny. As a cartoonist in *L’Express* wrote with some hyperbole in 1960, the “whole of humanity” could be divided into two groups: “left-wing Gaullists and right-wing Gaullists.” Even in 1969, at the nadir of the man’s popularity, Jean de Lipkowski prophetically observed that “the French have had enough of de Gaulle, but wait and see how the myth will have grown in thirty years’ time” (170).

Sudhir Hazareesingh (Balliol College, Oxford) explores that myth to explain more clearly the many contradictions and ambiguities in French political life since the humiliation of 1940. *In the Shadow of the General* is based largely on previously unexamined letters written to de Gaulle over the years by his countrymen, from urban to rural, conservative to communist, and religious to secular. Although a few letters are certainly negative, even they share a sense of the totemic role de Gaulle played not just in French politics, but in the personal lives of the writers themselves.

As with all such source collections, the issue of bias arises. Neither Hazareesingh nor his readers can know how representative the available letters are or how many other ones telling a different story never came to light. There is also, as the author admits, no way to explain the silences, notably of Algerians or *ped noirs*, the Algerians of European descent who fled Algeria in the early 1960s. Many of them blamed de Gaulle for surrendering Algeria to the insurgent Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), yet Hazareesingh suggests they held their silence out of respect for a man they disliked, to be sure, but nevertheless revered. That may be, but I doubt it.

Source problems notwithstanding, there is enough material here to allow for some broad conclusions and analyses. Perhaps the most significant is that de Gaulle, like so many mythic heroes, was able to adapt

1. See the website of La Fondation Charles de Gaulle – <http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1301.htm>.

readily to changes of time and place. He was, of course, no ordinary politician. He emerged not from the often despised world of internecine partisan politics, but from the army, whose pride he did so much to restore. In 1944, when he came into Paris at the moment of its liberation, he refused to take up residence at the Élysée Palace, believing an unelected leader had no right to do so. Even as President of the Republic, he felt uneasy in politics, rarely keeping personal effects in the Élysée and striving to hold himself above partisan bickering.

For this reason, de Gaulle's private home at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises became a special pilgrimage destination. Fittingly, it sits roughly between Paris and Verdun, the site of France's greatest First World War victory, where de Gaulle himself had fought and been taken prisoner. Still, he seldom mentioned his World War I service. He did not need to do so. Millions of Frenchmen had a heroic Great War tale to tell. No one, of course, had anything like de Gaulle's Second World War story. Colombey, therefore, became not a stop on a wartime pilgrimage of memory and commemoration, but a symbol of an eternal France removed from the viper's nest of official Paris. Only after de Gaulle's death (and likely against his wishes) was there a push to erect a massive Cross of Lorraine at Colombey. Representing Free France and de Gaulle himself, it, too, stood above politics—even the communists could see in it an emblem of the major role they had played in the national resistance movement.

As the cross at Colombey suggests, de Gaulle owed his fame to the liberation of Paris and the subsequent reestablishment of France as a great power independent of its Anglo-Saxon allies. Although de Gaulle had a relatively small direct role in the country's liberation, his actions in those heady days gave France both firm leadership and a sorely-needed vision for the future. Though he infuriated the British and the Americans with his stubbornness and arrogance, his adherence to a vision of French grandeur guaranteed his people a sense of pride absent since 1940, or even 1919. If his anti-Americanism seemed ungrateful or even petty, it was a necessary corollary to his vision of France as an independent actor on the global stage.

As Hazareesingh argues, the Gaullian myth cannot be separated from the torturous years of the Second World War. To most Frenchmen, the war was less the one fought against Germany than the civil war between those Frenchmen who worked with the occupiers and those who fought them. In truth, it was even more about the gray spaces in between and the difficult decisions the French made every day under the occupation. During those years, de Gaulle's was the only real voice of opposition, even if from 1940 to 1944 Frenchmen seldom heard it and then only by risking the wrath of the occupiers for listening to clandestine BBC broadcasts.

More importantly, embracing the postwar Gaullian myth was the easiest way for the French to show their antipathy for the collaborationist Vichy regime. Embracing de Gaulle affirmed the patriotism of Frenchmen without causing them to feel ashamed of all they had done or felt during the war. After all, de Gaulle himself had urged reconciliation, even if it required a certain collective amnesia about the horrors of those dark years. Forgiveness, not vengeance, was the order of the day and a central element of the Gaullian political vision.

So, too, was a belief in country over partisanship. Even de Gaulle's most implacable enemies on the left came to respect him, or at least his mythic power. As time went on, Hazareesingh maintains, the communists co-opted de Gaulle as a symbol of the struggle against Anglo-Saxon capitalism. At the same time, the man and his legend came to stand for everything from mainstream opposition to the European Union to the continued nationalization of key French industries and the right-wing extremism of Jean-Marie Le Pen (to whom de Gaulle's grandson and namesake became an embarrassingly close political ally). That de Gaulle's mythic presence proved so useful to such disparate political factions proves Hazareesingh's central thesis of the enormity of his shadow.

De Gaulle became a hero for all seasons and reasons. His iconic status, furthermore, dovetailed neatly with deeply held French beliefs. His private (rarely public) faith allowed his admirers to tie him to both Joan of Arc and the *zeitgeist* of an increasingly secular French nation. The left could associate him with Georges Clemenceau, the right with Louis XIV, and militarists with Ferdinand Foch. The common denominator was defense of the sacred soil of France. De Gaulle's conversion of military prestige into political power even

made him seem an heir to the traditions of Napoleon, while his unwillingness to exercise that power extralegally let some link him to the republican traditions of the revolution of 1789. The man tapped deep reservoirs of national pride without evoking images of such less attractive figures as Napoleon III or the Vichy leader with whom he had so much in common, Henri-Philippe Pétain. In the final analysis, de Gaulle's mix of revulsion at Pétain's ideals and leniency toward the old war hero himself typifies the careful tightrope walking required of him and believers in the power of his myth. Not coincidentally, many of the places and streets named for de Gaulle in 1945 had borne Pétain's name only a few months earlier.

Hazareesingh handles these and other topics deftly, although he understates the profound suspicion and distrust that always surrounded de Gaulle. He was, after all, fond of talking about himself in the third person and arrogating to himself a near-providential sense of destiny. While he may have been loved by millions, there were also dozens of assassination attempts against him. Of course, his good fortune in surviving these only underscored the aura of the supernatural conferred by the myth. At times, the book uncritically applies pop psychology to portray de Gaulle as Christlike or as a quasi-Freudian surrogate father (a word the author usually capitalizes) to the French. Hazareesingh makes far too little effort to wrestle with the ideas of de Gaulle's many competent biographers.

Still, this is a welcome book for those interested not just in de Gaulle but in the nature of French politics and society since 1945. Like his contemporary and sometime rival Winston Churchill, de Gaulle is a man more often quoted than understood, more often caricatured than seriously analyzed. Both men defy easy explanations and share a mythic status that complicates any attempt to understand them fully. Churchill himself appreciated full well the power of myth when he told de Gaulle in 1956, "No more heroes like *nous*, Charles."