

## CHARLES DE GAULLE

### President of France (1959-1969)

*Beginning from exile in 1940, de Gaulle became the leader of the Free French Forces against Germany in World War II. In 1958, he was recalled to power, created the Fifth French Republic, extricated France from Algeria and the rest of its overseas empire, and led France into a more independent foreign policy in Europe and the world.*

**BORN:** November 22, 1890; Lille, France

**DIED:** November 9, 1970; Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, France

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Charles André Joseph Marie de Gaulle (full name)

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Government and politics, diplomacy

#### EARLY LIFE

Charles de Gaulle (gawl) was born in the northern French city of Lille. Over several centuries, his family had played many roles in the history of France, and his father, Henri, was wounded during the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Henri later turned to teaching and instilled in his children, including Charles, the second child, a deep love for France. The de Gaulle household was traditional, conservative, patriotic, and Roman Catholic.

Choosing a military career, de Gaulle enlisted in the French army in 1909. The following year he entered the prestigious military school of Saint-Cyr, where his great height—six feet, five inches—and large nose led to the nicknames of the Great Asparagus and Cyrano. In 1912, he was assigned to an infantry regiment led by Philippe Pétain, a French hero in World War I who turned collaborator with Germany in World War II. During World War I, de Gaulle was wounded three times, captured by the Germans on the third occasion, and imprisoned for the duration of the war.

During the 1920's, while still a junior officer, de Gaulle developed his philosophy of military leadership, arguing that the successful leader must personify national grandeur and increase his power and prestige by distancing himself from the people. In 1932, he presaged his own later leadership in *Le Fil de l'épée* (*The Edge of the Sword*, 1960). In addition, de Gaulle disagreed with the prevailing military philosophy of the French high command, whose static defense posture culminated in the Maginot line. De Gaulle, on the other hand, preached

the virtues of the tank, with its more mobile possibilities. To publicize his ideas, in 1934 he wrote *Vers l'armée de métier* (*The Army of the Future*, 1940). Not the first nor necessarily the most important prophet of the tank—there were others in Germany and Great Britain—he remained an outspoken advocate of its use and a consistent critic of the army's policies. His influence was minimal, however, in part because of his own austerity and aloofness but more so because of the defeatism, apathy, and lack of vision of the leading politicians and generals of the Third French Republic.

#### LIFE'S WORK

It was only in the spring of 1940, with Germany's invasion of France, that de Gaulle was allowed to put into practice his theories of mobile defense. However, his small successes proved insufficient, and the Third Republic crumbled. A minor member of the cabinet after having finally received the rank of general, de Gaulle alone among the government chose to flee France rather than capitulate to the Germans. After his escape to London, he addressed France over the British Broadcasting Company (BBC); his first speech, known famously as the Appeal of June 18, was short and probably few heard him, but his message—resistance to Germany must continue—was the one he reiterated throughout the war, and it was heeded by all opposed to the Nazis. De Gaulle had supreme confidence in himself, but his emergence as the military and political leader of the French resistance was also the result of the lack of alternatives—the leading politicians and military figures remained loyal to the collaborationist regime of Marshal Pétain, de Gaulle's former mentor.

The position of the obscure general was precarious. Few in France or elsewhere had heard of de Gaulle; he had no resources and depended on the generosity and the decisions of the British government. Winston Churchill admired de Gaulle, and the two agreed on the necessity for continued French resistance, but their relationship remained difficult and often stormy. De Gaulle was a formidable figure, personally and physically, and his single goal was to restore what he envisioned as France's former glory and power. This restoration meant the defeat of Germany, but it also caused de Gaulle to frequently distrust the means and ends of Churchill's Great Britain and Franklin D. Roosevelt's United States. Having nothing, de Gaulle believed that he must demand everything

for France. He was not an easy cross for Churchill to bear.

In addition to resistance to the German occupation within France, de Gaulle relied on the resources and backing of the French overseas empire, sometimes to the opposition and chagrin of the British and American governments. Roosevelt particularly disliked the difficult Frenchman, and he underestimated de Gaulle throughout the war, treating him with petty disdain. Even as late as the Allied invasion of France in June, 1944, Roosevelt was still unwilling to recognize de Gaulle fully. Churchill was far more supportive, but Britain's need for American support caused him to defer to Roosevelt. De Gaulle never forgot the seeming inferiority ascribed to himself and France by his American and British allies.

Perhaps the greatest moment for de Gaulle was the triumphal procession down Paris's Champs-Élysées to Notre Dame Cathedral on August 26, 1944. The Germans had withdrawn and the Allies, including French troops, had taken over the city. It was both de Gaulle's personal vindication and that of his country. He quickly moved to incorporate the French resistance forces into the regular French army, in part because he feared the revolutionary

aims of communists within the resistance movement. In spite of French participation in the final battles of World War II, de Gaulle was not invited to attend the crucial Yalta Conference. Still, partially because of Churchill's influence, France was given an occupation zone in Germany at the war's end.

De Gaulle long believed that the weakness of the Third Republic was the predominance of politicians and parties and the excessive power of the national assembly. France needed a strong executive. In the months after the war concluded, de Gaulle, as head of the interim government, found himself frustrated by the revival of the claims of the assembly and the rivalries among the politicians. Fearing that the evils of the Third Republic had returned, in January, 1946, he suddenly resigned. The following year, he and his supporters formed the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (Rally of the French People), an overtly nationalistic and ostensibly antiparty movement, but, despite considerable initial success, after the creation of the Fourth Republic, it dwindled away. Critics claimed that de Gaulle had become too much the demagogue and was a potential dictator. Finally, in 1953 he retired to his country home at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises and in three volumes wrote his account of World War II.

Although he had withdrawn from public life, de Gaulle continued to believe that the Fourth Republic with its many governments and changing premiers would ultimately fail. The civil war in Algeria brought him back to power. Algeria had been a part of France since the mid-nineteenth century, but anticolonial and nationalistic elements demanded independence, and violence broke out in 1954. The military was committed to French rule, and the politicians of the Fourth Republic unenthusiastically followed the lead of the generals. By May, 1958, it seemed likely that a military coup would result. De Gaulle appeared to be the only alternative, and he thus became the last premier of the Fourth Republic.

He received extraordinary powers. When the assembly once again reassembled the Fourth Republic was no more. A new constitution was written under de Gaulle's guidance, and he became the first president of the Fifth Republic. In it, the balance of power was shifted from the national assembly to the president, an increase in executive authority de Gaulle had long advocated. As always he remained concerned with restoring the power and the glory of France. To do so he came to the conclusion that the vast French colonial empire must be given the opportunity for more freedom. He had hoped that the colonies would accept some sort of community dominated by



*Charles de Gaulle.* (Library of Congress)

France, but, when most of them preferred independence, de Gaulle, and France, settled for influence instead of authority. The Algerian affair took longer to resolve. European settlers and the French army were adamantly opposed to Algerian independence; rumors of military coups continued, and there were several assassination attempts against de Gaulle. It was not until 1962 that de Gaulle and France were able to escape from the North African morass.

Although de Gaulle was one of the major public figures of the twentieth century, he was a very private person. His personal life was kept rigorously separate from his public career. He married Yvonne Vendroux in 1921, and she, always supportive of her husband, generally remained out of public view. They had three children. De Gaulle had few friendships outside his family and was loath to become too familiar with either his colleagues or his subordinates. His sense of humor, such as it was, was dry and satirical.

He remained more concerned with the image and position of France in the world than domestic life in France itself. Toward the end of the 1960's, the economy stagnated. Student unrest and labor demands led to demonstrations and violence in the spring of 1968. With some difficulty, de Gaulle and his regime survived. He resigned the following year, however, after the voters turned down a minor constitutional change that he had proposed. He retired once again to his country home, where he died shortly before his eightieth birthday.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

It was said that de Gaulle loved France but not the French. He distrusted most politicians, feared the excesses and irresponsibility of most parliamentary bodies, and was consistent in demanding a strong executive. Nevertheless, if he had doubts in the efficacy of many democratic institutions and practices, he himself was a superb communicator in a democratic age. A writer of considerable ability and accomplishment, he could also be a masterful public speaker. In particular, de Gaulle was a brilliant television performer, both in his news conferences and in more formal speeches. His physical appearance somehow conveyed grandeur, commitment, and ability.

### DE GAULLE'S APPEAL OF JUNE 18

*With the rise of the Nazi-installed Vichy government, led by Philippe Pétain, François Darlan, Joseph Darnand, and others, General Charles de Gaulle issued his famous Appeal of June 18, aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation on that date in 1940. De Gaulle's words prompted the French Resistance, the struggle against Nazi occupation that would last through World War II.*

The leaders who, for many years, were at the head of French armies, have formed a government. This government, alleging our armies to be undone, agreed with the enemy to stop fighting. Of course, we were subdued by the mechanical, ground and air forces of the enemy. Infinitely more than their number, it was the tanks, the airplanes, the tactics of the Germans which made us retreat. It was the tanks, the airplanes, the tactics of the Germans that surprised our leaders to the point to bring them there where they are today.

But has the last word been said? Must hope disappear? Is defeat final? No!

Believe me, I speak to you with full knowledge of the facts and tell you that nothing is lost for France. The same means that overcame us can bring us to a day of victory. For France is not alone! She is not alone! She is not alone! She has a vast Empire behind her. She can align with the British Empire that holds the sea and continues the fight. She can, like England, use without limit the immense industry of the United States.

This war is not limited to the unfortunate territory of our country. This war is not finished by the battle of France. This war is a world-wide war. All the faults, all the delays, all the suffering, do not prevent there to be, in the world, all the necessary means to one day crush our enemies. Vanquished today by mechanical force, we will be able to overcome in the future by a superior mechanical force.

The destiny of the world is here. I, General de Gaulle, currently in London, invite the officers and the French soldiers who are located in British territory or who would come there, with their weapons or without their weapons, I invite the engineers and the special workers of armament industries who are located in British territory or who would come there, to put themselves in contact with me.

Whatever happens, the flame of the French resistance must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished. Tomorrow, as today, I will speak on Radio London.

De Gaulle's most controversial legacy was his foreign policy. Although distrustful of French communists, he was generally most difficult in his relations with his Western allies. After returning to power in 1958, he supported France's development of nuclear weapons. A strong nationalist, he only reluctantly participated in any

political integration of the European Common Market: De Gaulle preferred a federal system in which the nations of Europe continued to maintain their unique identities. At the height of the Cold War, he opposed the continuing division of the world into two armed camps and withdrew France from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. De Gaulle also vetoed Britain's application to join the common market: He argued that the British government was too subject to the United States' policies. He publicly objected to American involvement in Vietnam and gave diplomatic recognition to the Communist regime in China. He wanted a Europe for the Europeans, even Germans, and, within that Europe, France was to play its traditional major role. His goals appeared quixotic at the time, but he had a consistent vision of a revived Europe, no longer dominated by the superpowers and their Cold War concerns.

—Eugene S. Larson

#### FURTHER READING

- Bozo, Frédéric. *Two Strategies for Europe: De Gaulle, the United States, and the Atlantic Alliance*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. Examines Franco-American relations and the evolution of the Atlantic Alliance during de Gaulle's presidency.
- Cook, Don. *Charles de Gaulle: A Biography*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1983. Cook, a journalist who covered French politics for many years, has written a readable biography of de Gaulle. An American, the author particularly stresses the often difficult relations between de Gaulle and American presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Richard M. Nixon.
- Horne, Alistair. *A Savage War of Peace*. New York: Viking Press, 1978. Horne, a British historian, writes brilliantly about the French-Algerian civil war, the conflict that brought de Gaulle back to power in 1958 and continued to be his major concern until it was finally resolved in 1962.
- Jackson, Julian. *Charles de Gaulle*. London: Haus, 2003. A concise but comprehensive biography, contrasting de Gaulle's idea of what France should be with the realities of his life.

Kersaudy, François. *Churchill and De Gaulle*. New York: Atheneum, 1982. The author presents in a comprehensive manner and readable style the fascinating love-hate relationship between two of the major political figures of the twentieth century. Both were representative of their countries but both were also unique personalities.

Ledwidge, Bernard. *DeGaulle*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982. The author, a British diplomat, served in Paris during the latter years of de Gaulle's last administration. Sympathetic to de Gaulle as a statesman and politician, Ledwidge is particularly interested in de Gaulle's foreign policies.

Werth, Alexander. *De Gaulle*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966. This political biography was written before de Gaulle's final retirement in 1969. Nevertheless, Werth, a historian of modern French history, has many useful insights about the persona and accomplishments of de Gaulle.

**SEE ALSO:** Léon Blum; Sir Winston Churchill; Édouard Herriot; Adolf Hitler; Ho Chi Minh; François Mitterrand; Philippe Pétain; Georges Pompidou; Franklin D. Roosevelt.

**RELATED ARTICLES** in *Great Events from History: The Twentieth Century*:

**1901-1940:** 1936-1946: France Nationalizes Its Banking and Industrial Sectors.

**1941-1970:** 1941-August 25, 1944: French Resistance; January 14-24, 1943: Casablanca Conference; March 15, 1944: France Grants Suffrage to Women; May 8, 1945: Algerian Nationalists Riot at Sétif; March 17, 1946: France Launches the Monnet Plan; March 25, 1957: European Common Market Is Established; 1960: Quebec Sovereignist Movement Begins; January 4, 1960: European Free Trade Association Is Established; July 5, 1962: Algeria Gains Independence from France; March 7, 1966: France Withdraws from NATO's Military Structure; May-June, 1968: French Students and Workers Rebel Against the Political Order; April 28, 1969: De Gaulle Steps Down.