



# Charles de Gaulle's Idea of Europe. The Lasting Legacy

*Charles de Gaulle, the French President from 1959 to 1969, developed a very specific vision of Europe, which was applied boldly when he was in charge. His ideas have had a lasting legacy on many historians –and not only in France– who have adopted a “de Gaulle-centered” approach to the History of Europe in the 1960s.*

By Laurent Warlouzet

Two recent books on European history in the 1960s are entitled “*The Gaullist Challenge*” (Ludlow, 2005; Ellison, 2007). They have been written by English-language academics and are a sign of the crucial and enduring role that is attributed to the former French president Charles de Gaulle in such historical studies even outside of France. This article aims to show that this central - but perhaps also excessive - position of a personality like de Gaulle is linked both to his own personal involvement in trying to stage a cult around his own role in French history, and a tendency for historians of political history to adopt a heroic approach, that is, to seek out heroes and villains in their stories.

De Gaulle played an important role during the Second World War as leader of the provisional French government in London from 1940 to 1944. During the Second World War, the *France Libre* was the country's provisional government established outside France (in London and later in Algiers) in opposition to the official French government which after the defeat of June 1940 collaborated with the Nazis. De Gaulle subsequently became the official French authority after the Liberation of France in 1944. He stepped down in 1946, but decided to return to the top of French policy in June 1958 as French *Président du Conseil*, that is, as Prime Minister. From January 1959 to 1969 he assumed the position as President of the Republic. His return to power was also marked by the development of a particular set of political ideas in French politics that was named after him - *Gaullism* - just as it coincided with the entering into force of the Treaty of Rome creating the European Economic Community (EEC).

Thus, there was a conjunction of two trends in European political history: the strengthening of European integration and the development of a France deeply influenced by Gaullism. Gaullism can be seen as a set of political principles that evolves around the idea of the central role of France in the world. In terms of foreign policy, the notion of “grandeur” (greatness) was typically translated into a strongly assertive policy. This

was based on a widespread belief among French policy-makers and observers that France, notwithstanding her post-colonial decline, was still bound to play a leading role in international affairs in the post-war era. The organisation of Europe through international organisations such as the EEC played a major role in this. In de Gaulle's speeches and writings he advocated the development of an intergovernmental Europe where the nation-state remained intact, and in opposition to the federal principles that some of France's European partners were advocating. In his view, Europe should be under French leadership in terms of foreign policy, and European cooperation should become a lever for French influence in the world. Against the background of such ideas, he refused to let Great-Britain become a member of the EEC in 1963 and 1967. He also advocated a greater role for France in the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in September 1958. Unable to obtain what he wanted from the Americans, who had a hegemonic position within NATO, he withdrew France from NATO's integrated military organisation in 1966.

Drawing on recent literature on the history of France and European integration in the 1960s (Warlouzet, 2008, 2010), this article aims to address the methodological problem of placing so much emphasis on the influence of a single person and his ideas. A central argument of the article is that de Gaulle personally played a key role in presenting himself as a semi-mythical figure. Through his own writings, he was able to shape the collective memory of himself, and he managed to influence historians and political observers in France and abroad.

## **Charles de Gaulle: a Mythical Figure in France**

It is clear in most accounts of contemporary French history that De Gaulle was an exceptional character for one obvious reason: he took the lead in winning two wars for France. The first was when de Gaulle in June 1940, as a general in the French armed forces, was appointed deputy minister during the collapse of the French army against the Nazis. Notwithstanding the



collaboration of the official French government in Vichy with Nazi Germany, and the lack of any “official” French government in exile, he succeeded in creating from scratch another French authority in London, called *France libre*, with the support of British war-time Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. From abroad, he exerted pressure, and finally managed to oust the Vichy regime, although it was the official French regime during most of the war, also recognised by for example the government of the United States. De Gaulle thus secured a strong position for France in the camp of the winners of the war. Although the French army was crushed within few weeks in 1940, France subsequently managed to become one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and one of the four countries to occupy Germany at the end of the war. Without de Gaulle’s efforts, it is certainly possible to question whether France would have been seen as being on the side of the winners or losers of The Second World War.

The subsequent war to involve de Gaulle was the Algerian war. He returned to power in 1958, at a time when France was on the brink of losing this war. Algeria was a French colonial territory where more than one million Europeans lived. In spring 1958, the French army stationed in Algeria did not want this territory to be left to the Arabs. Yet it was also clear that this part of the French army was increasingly hostile to the political leadership in homeland France that was weak and unstable. There had been four different governments in 1957-58 alone, and long periods of vacancy between most of them which had fostered a rather unclear line of policy towards the Algerian conflict. On 13 May 1958, the French army, which was very hostile to the independence of Algeria, seized power in the city of Algiers with the support of the local European population. It sent the message back home that it would simply refuse to obey the government in Paris unless it would change significantly its moderate stance on Algeria. Against this background, de Gaulle was appointed prime minister by the French parliament on 2 June 1958. With his legacy from the Second World War and his background as a general of the French army, it seemed that he was the only politician at the time to keep the army in check. Subsequently, de Gaulle succeeded in giving independence to Algeria, which happened in the midst of a quasi-civil war that in the following years escalated with violence and terrorism, and finally an attempted *coup d’état* by French generals stationed in Algeria in April 1961.

When it is said that de Gaulle won the Algerian war, it is not a military conclusion but a political one: his re-emergence on the political stage prevented the outbreak of a civil war and maintained the authority of the

French state. In France, his policies resulted in an exceptional popular legitimacy. From June 1958 to April 1969, de Gaulle won two presidential elections - namely in December 1958 and December 1965, and parliamentary elections in November 1958, November 1962, March 1967 and in June 1968, as well as four referendums in September 1958 and October 1962 on constitutional reforms, and on Algerian independence in January 1961 and April 1962. He finally lost the referendum over domestic constitutional reform on 27 April 1969, and resigned the following day. This show of popular support allowed him to stay in power for 11 years, a time during which he also developed a set of policies towards European collaboration.

De Gaulle occupies a strong position in French collective memory, one that developed rather quickly. In polls carried out in 1980, only 10 years after his death, and confirmed in 1990, more than 80 per cent of the French had a positive memory of de Gaulle’s policy in general. French people from both the left and from the far-left were in fact strongly positive towards de Gaulle’s achievements, pointing mainly to his role during the Second World War. Only far-right French people were more sceptical because they opposed the independence of Algeria (Institut Charles de Gaulle, 1992a:16). The collective memory of de Gaulle’s achievements is paralleled by no other post-war politician in France (Rioux, 1991: 303).

This consensus could be explained by several factors. First of all, even if de Gaulle had strong ideas about the role of France in the world, he was essentially a pragmatic politician in domestic policy (Berstein, 2001:7-8). He was a professional soldier brought up in a conservative family with a strong catholic and monarchist culture. As head of the French state, he restored the republican democratic order twice, namely in 1940-44 and in 1958. He also made more unconventional gestures including the right of vote to women in 1944, and in 1967 his government legalised contraception (Agulhon, 2000:140-142). When he was in power, de Gaulle refused to consider himself as leader of a majority of French people, and despite the term Gaullism, he saw himself as being above the compartmentalisation of political parties. He had rather distant relationships to the successive Gaullist parties (Quagliariello, 2007:370-375) though he was for instance very friendly towards the group known as “leftist Gaullist” including politicians such as René Capitan or Louis Vallon. In retrospect, this was a legacy that fared well with both right and left wing citizen. Few other figures have such a legacy in French collective memory, one is the medieval figure Joan of Arc (Agulhon, 2000: 107).



This popular consensus is also easily observable in French foreign policy historiography. Leftist French intellectuals such as Michel Winock have expressed their support for de Gaulle's foreign policy, because of its anti-US stance (Winock, 1991:522). Maurice Agulhon's book from 2000 about de Gaulle began with a justification of his choice of this subject already in the first chapter because it was not seen as "*politically correct*" for a leftist historian to write about de Gaulle's achievements (Agulhon, 2000:11-20). He explained that this character fascinated him by exactly bridging the classical left-right boundaries. Agulhon explained the French popular consensus around de Gaulle's foreign policy by a comparison between the French leader and the comic strip character Astérix (Agulhon, 2000:128-130). Astérix is a Gallic who fights against the Romans after the conquest of the Gaul (the ancient name for France) by Julius Caesar in 51 BC. In Astérix, the foes are the Romans. They are not depicted as very threatening and are also admired as a source of progress and civilisation. In his book, Agulhon made the parallel between the Romans and the Americans. Indeed, the Americans are not considered dangerous, and the anti-imperialist discourse has consistently been popular in France after 1945. For Agulhon, de Gaulle gave to the French people a new discourse on their role in the world. Before 1940, the dominant discourse was imperial: France was a great power with a large colonial empire. De Gaulle restored a French pride through an anti-imperialist discourse, as well as his notional fight against American domination. This interpretation is confirmed by another renowned French historian, Pierre Nora who observed that "the historical genius of de Gaulle consisted of enveloping the real diminution of French power in the vocabulary of grandeur; [and] of transforming magically the most crushing of military defeats [in 1940] into a manner of victory" (Nora, 1997:2504, quoted in Cogan, 2003:232). Moreover, this new interpretation fits well with the messianic perception of France and an anxiety towards issues such as globalisation. It is also linked to what Charles Cogan has called the French "culture of the underdog" as "the idea of France as a nation has historically carried with it the theme of the country struggling against the dominant power in Europe" regardless of whether they were British, Germans or Americans (Cogan, 2003:66-70). In short, de Gaulle has obtained a mythical status in French history,<sup>1</sup> as a figure that evokes images and positive memories to the average French citizen, even if

---

<sup>1</sup> The last sentence of Julian Jackson biography of de Gaulle is : «Among the many realizations of the General, none would be more durable than his myth» (my translation, L.W.) [Et des nombreux accomplissements du Général, aucun ne sera plus durable que son mythe]. Jackson, 2004:193.

he or she may not actually remember what exactly de Gaulle did (Agulhon, M., 2000: 99). This consensus and mythical status has been carried over into the analysis of his foreign policy, and became an important factor in explaining why his legacy has become so central for European history in the 1960s.

### The origins of the myth

De Gaulle has a central place in the literature on European political history in the 1960s. As early as 1990, a book published by the *Institut Charles de Gaulle* stated that more than 1800 books had been written on his actions between 1980 and 1990 (Institut Charles de Gaulle, 1990). Interestingly, and as also observed by the renowned French historian Pierre Nora, this rather exceptional situation is explained firstly by the way de Gaulle himself represented his own place in history through his own books (Nora, 1991:173-176; De Gaulle, 1954 and 1971).

Born and raised in a highly educated family with a father who was professor of literature and history, the young Charles became very interested in French history and politics, in philosophy and literature. He was a literary person with a polished and assertive prose well suited for communicating with a broad audience. Already in the interwar period, de Gaulle published several studies dealing with the reasons for the German defeat during World War I, and with the modernisation of the French Army (De Gaulle, 1924, 1932 and 1934). On the basis of these books, he became known among experts and politicians as an army officer with rather bold ideas. For instance, he suggested organising the whole army around tanks instead of foot soldiers as had been the case during the trench war of 1914-1918.

After his first period of French leadership during and immediately after the Second World War, de Gaulle in 1954 released the first volume of his *Memoirs* (De Gaulle, 1954). They began by an assertion of his personal vision of France and her *Grandeur* (greatness) throughout the centuries. Thus, these memories were a way for him to demonstrate in writing that he could indeed restore France's traditional position as a leader in world history. In his writings, he explained how he began from scratch after the French defeat of June 1940, and how he raised himself up to the highest rank among international leaders by for instance describing his difficult negotiations with Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. The aim of these memories was to show that a direct link existed between de Gaulle, France, and world history. Then, de Gaulle came back to power from 1958 to 1969. As soon as he quit the Presidency in April 1969, de Gaulle enhanced his status by leaving for Ireland during the following presidential campaign



(when his successor and former Prime Minister Georges Pompidou was elected), and by refusing to comment on French political life (Rioux, 1991:305). He drafted successive volumes of his memories but did not manage to complete them before he died in 1970 (Nora, 1991:173-176). De Gaulle's memories were hugely successful because of their literary qualities and of their capacity to tell a story which was precise and comprehensive on one hand, and a real hero's tale on the other.

Moreover, his memoirs remain very important sources for historians today. After de Gaulle's death, the legacy of the former French President was maintained by his own son, Philippe de Gaulle. The latter still keeps a monopoly on the personal archives of his father. The official archives are open but papers written by de Gaulle are rare to find here.<sup>2</sup> That is why the publication of some of de Gaulle's personal papers by his son has become very important as historical sources (De Gaulle, 1984-1987). In particular, they contain a large number of letters between de Gaulle and his son which are not essential to understand French or European political history in the 1960s. However, it should be remembered, these documents were selected by Philippe de Gaulle and not by historians.

In addition, the writings of his former aides have come to play an important role in historical studies. For example, a key historical source on de Gaulle is a series of conferences organised in 1990 by the *Institut Charles de Gaulle* in Paris (Institut Charles de Gaulle, 1991, 1992b, 1992c). These collected academic papers along with numerous eye-witness accounts that again place de Gaulle at the centre, and largely enhanced the mythical and heroic status of the former French President.<sup>3</sup> Even the Cuban leader Fidel Castro was invited to give his opinion of de Gaulle and, perhaps not surprisingly, gave his blessings to de Gaulle's sceptical views of American imperialism (Institut Charles de Gaulle, 1991). Subsequently, when one of his former ministers, Alain Peyrefitte, released his memoirs, they became an important book of reference for de Gaulle's presidency

as they (according to Peyrefitte) contained numerous firsthand quotations by de Gaulle (Peyrefitte, 1994a, 1994b, 2001). For example, Peyrefitte's memories are the main source used by the political scientist Andrew Moravcsik, who wrote a well-known, but also hugely contested, book on European integration history (Moravcsik, 1999:178).

Regarding de Gaulle's idea of Europe specifically, the first study was written already in 1966 while he was still in power. This book largely follows the Gaullist fashion of history books mentioned above (Jouve, 1967). It is well-documented and interesting but avoids any criticism of the French leader's vision and politics, although it was highly controversial in those days with for instance de Gaulle's rejection of British membership of the EEC in 1963, or the staging of the "empty chair crisis" when the French government withdrew representation from the EEC for eight months beginning in mid-1965. Therefore, what could be termed pro-Gaullist sources still dominate the source-base for observers of de Gaulle's presidency, and these obviously have a positive spin on de Gaulle's pivotal role in French and European history.

### De Gaulle's historians

As an addition to the pro-Gaullist sources and interpretations, another cluster of scholarship could simply be called "de Gaulle-centred". They tend to interpret French European Policy only through de Gaulle's lens. This group is, firstly, composed of de Gaulle specialists. They are more critical of de Gaulle's policy than his former collaborators but are still rather positive towards his actions. This group includes for example Jean Lacouture, a journalist who wrote a well-known biography of de Gaulle (Lacouture, 1984a, 1984b, 1986). A leftist supporter of Pierre Mendès-France - an important figure of the French left and Prime Minister in 1954-1955 - Lacouture was not Gaullist from a political point of view. However, he wrote a biography that was mostly positive towards de Gaulle's European policy (Lacouture, 1991:510), even if he does criticise some of its obvious contradictions and failures (Lacouture, 1986:342).

Such a focus on de Gaulle is shared by several historians. The most well-known is Maurice Vaisse, who wrote on the history of de Gaulle's foreign policy (Vaisse, 1998). He mentions the limits of de Gaulle's policies, (Vaisse, 1998: 675-679) but gives a broadly sympathetic vision of the topic. For example, he interprets the so-called Luxembourg Compromise of January 1966 at the end of the Empty Chair Crisis as "a victory for the Gaullist conception of European institutions" (Vaisse, 1998:562-563) although historical studies

---

<sup>2</sup> This is especially the case of the 5AG1 fond in the French National Archives, but also in Private Papers of the closest collaborators of de Gaulle such as two former Prime Ministers of the President de Gaulle: Maurice Couve de Murville and Michel Debré. Both Private funds are deposited at the *Fondation Nationale des sciences politiques* in Paris.

<sup>3</sup> In the volume 3 on Europe, two important papers were given by former assistants of de Gaulle: Jean-Marc Boegner, former French permanent representative in Brussels (1961-72) gave a paper on «Les principes de la politique européenne du général de Gaulle»; Alain Prate, former economic advisor of de Gaulle (1967-1969), gave a paper on «Le général de Gaulle et la construction européenne».



have shown that adopting a less French perspective leads to a somewhat more nuanced picture of this event. Professional historians of European integration history in particular underline the fact that the institutional balance was hardly changed by the Luxembourg compromise, that de Gaulle failed in his attempt to revise the Rome Treaties, and that his demands of less qualified majority voting in the Council of Ministers were shared by other member-states, especially the more softly spoken government of the Federal Republic of Germany (Ludlow, 121-122; Palayret, Wallace and Winand, 2006).

Even outside France, the emphasis on the heroic dimension of de Gaulle's life is highly present, and celebrated in biographies such as that by Bernard Ledwige, an English diplomat with a historical training (Ledwige, 1984:411). More generally, scholars subscribing to the international relations theory of intergovernmentalism tend to write the history of European integration in the 1960s emphasising de Gaulle's role. The American scholar Andrew Moravcsik explained the major features of the early years of the EEC by de Gaulle's doctrine and its clash with the other EEC countries (Moravcsik, 1999: 176-197). In fact, the French role in European integration is often considered only through de Gaulle's eyes. The most well-known example is Stanley Hoffmann's seminal article which based its interpretation of the whole history of European integration partly on de Gaulle's initiatives (Hoffmann, 1966). For Hoffmann, de Gaulle's bold European policy showed clearly the continued strength of nation-states, and the failure of the supranational institutions that had been emphasised in the competing version of European integration history based upon neo-functional theory (Haas, 1958; Lindberg, 1963). These scholars are not "Gaullist", in the sense of the French writers above, as they also highlight the failures of de Gaulle and the contradictions of his ideas. However, they help to build up a story around the heroic figure of de Gaulle as they adopt a de Gaulle-centred approach. This story is closely linked to certain methodological choices. For example, Maurice Vaïsse based his analysis mainly on account of bilateral meetings between de Gaulle and his counterparts. This state-centred approach overlooks the complexity of the decision-making system, especially in the case of European policy, in which the EEC institutions play a major role by developing overlapping transnational networks of civil servants, politicians and experts (Kaiser, 2008:12-33).

However, even for historians who go beyond the nation-centered approach to the history of the EEC's institutions, the central role of de Gaulle is continuously emphasised. This is especially true for federalist histo-

rians, those who were sympathetic to the idea of a federal Europe (with strong supranational institutions and weak nation-states), in contrast to de Gaulle's vision of European integration based on a belief in the centrality of nation-states in political history. However, by focusing their critique on de Gaulle, the federalists actually tend to enhance his role in history. This is for example the interpretation of Bino Olivi, an Italian former spokesperson of the European Commission (Olivi, 2007). In his history of European integration, Olivi described the "empty chair crisis" (1965-66) as a personal fight between de Gaulle and Walter Hallstein, the federalist President of the EEC Commission (Olivi, 2007:86-91). In this sense, Olivi developed a heroic story of the EEC similar to Homer's account of the Trojan War, centred on bilateral fights between the most important characters, leaving aside the others figures and the broader dynamics of institutional, political, economic and cultural developments.

Lastly, another group of scholars has recently tried to write a history freed from these Gaullist or federalist prejudices. Piers Ludlow for example, wrote a history of the Six and the EEC between the 1963-1969 period (Ludlow, 2005). He did so from a multilateral perspective, relying on very different archival materials in order to overcome the nation-state focus.<sup>4</sup> Notably, however, his book is entitled *The Gaullist Challenge* and his conclusion begins by an assessment of de Gaulle's policy (Ludlow, 2005:200-205). Nonetheless, he clearly points out the gap between de Gaulle's rhetoric and the policy actually applied by the French representatives in the EEC institutions. Arguably, one of the main interests of his study is to "demythologise" some of the aspects of de Gaulle's policy, thus questioning the classical Gaullist and "de Gaulle-centred" literatures (Ludlow, 2005:6; Ludlow, 2001:247-264). A similar endeavour is found in another recent book on European history in the 1960s that also uses a multilateral perspective, written by James Ellison. Also this book holds the title *The Gaullist Challenge* (Ellison, 2007). Moreover, De Gaulle is still an important figure in contemporary historical studies, as a recent Ph.D.-dissertation on "Denmark and the Gaullist vision" has shown (Noer, 2006). The British de Gaulle's biographer, Julian Jackson, even concludes that the Gaullist "myth" is the most durable effect of the French leader in regards to "Europe: (Jackson, 2004: 193).

In short, the vast majority of scholars studying European political history in the 1960s, in France and

---

<sup>4</sup> Piers Ludlow has consulted the archives of five countries (France, Germany, Great-Britain, Italy, the Netherlands) and of the European Union.



abroad, share the view that de Gaulle's ideas and policy are central to understanding this period. They do not reach the same conclusions on the soundness of de Gaulle's initiatives, or on the coherence of his doctrine, but they continue to strengthen his position in European integration history. The contested legacy of de Gaulle has simply triggered a debate that reinforces the place of the role of this French political leader, and his particular idea of Europe. However, as the next section will demonstrate, de Gaulle's prominent position in the literature on European political history also owes itself to the nature of his idea of Europe.

### Charles de Gaulle's idea of Europe

De Gaulle's own reflections on the political construction of Europe are very coherent, and stem from a specific personal background. However, at the same time it is also necessary to recognise the ambiguities in his idea of Europe in order to point to the exaggeration of a heroic approach to the role of de Gaulle in European integration historiography. The Gaullist doctrine was based on two interlinked notions: the nation and the state. Accordingly, the main task of a French politician is to defend the nation, its existence, its identity and its strength. The point of departure for de Gaulle was that the French nation dated 2000 years back in history. It was old and dynamic while also likely to be doomed by internal divisions. Therefore, the only way to maintain its unity was to rely on a strong state. The French state, according to de Gaulle, was the union of the ancient nation and strong state institutions. De Gaulle had a personal vision of France. He saw her as a woman, committed to achieving a major historical project for the sake of herself and the whole of humanity (Agulhon, 2000:28). He believed that France had a special role to play in the world in terms of guiding it forward. As he explained in the first page of his memoirs, France was committed to *grandeur*, and thus to conduct a bold and ambitious foreign policy (De Gaulle, 1954, vol. 1:267-268). Pursuing this aim was the only way to keep the French people united and dynamic.

This deep conviction triggered a European policy based on the promotion of the nation-state. The strengthening of the cooperation between Europeans should be based on an intergovernmental approach and every federalist ambition would have to be thwarted. Although de Gaulle never expressed this clearly, it is obvious that in order to satisfy his goal of French *grandeur*, the European organisations should be under French leadership. This purpose was expressed clearly in his willingness to free Europe from any American influence.

This idea also stems from his personal background. De Gaulle was raised in a traditional Catholic family in

which the value of the nation as well as history were very important. He was largely educated before 1914. Born in 1890, he developed his passion for France as he knew it before the First World War. During the period 1890 to 1914, France is known to have been in a very nationalistic mood, grounded in the defeat against Prussia and its allies in 1870 as well as the colonial expansion. In this context, the defence of France was the foremost political priority. That is why de Gaulle chose to join the French army although his father was not a military person. Moreover, his vision of Europe is linked to his personal history. Thus, he explained the German invasion of France in 1940, which sparked his political career, with the weakness of the French state in the 1930s. In his analysis, this weakness had triggered a lack of cohesion among the French people. Against this background, he advocated a thorough reform of the French political system, which was previously based on a strong parliament and governmental instability, towards reinforcing a presidential system in which governments are more stable.

In terms of Europe, his experience of the Second World War explains his willingness to assert Europe's independence from the United States. During the War, de Gaulle was met with persistent hostility from the US president Roosevelt who considered him as a potential dictator. As leader of the *France Libre* – the alternative government to the official French government in Vichy - he was supported by Churchill already in June 1940 when he came to London after the French defeat. The government of the United States, however, only recognised the authority of the exile government in the summer of 1944 after the landing of allied troops on the coast of Normandy. After this difficult period, de Gaulle was very resentful not to have been invited to the Yalta conference in February 1945, although he did meet Stalin in December 1944 where they concluded a Franco-Soviet Treaty (Soutou, G.-H., 2001: 35-52). He however decided to interpret the Yalta conference as an attempt by the "big three" leaders to isolate France from influence on the post-war world order, something that he met with tremendous outrage. De Gaulle's own interpretations and experiences of the 1930s and the 1940s therefore strongly reinforced his determination to assert the strength of the French nation-state both internally and externally. He saw himself as being fully committed to the defence of liberty against the peril of totalitarianism - in the form of both nazism and soviet socialism - but he was also fully aware of the necessity to promote an independent voice for Europe within the West.

Another factor that can explain de Gaulle's approach to European policy as leader of France between 1958 and



1969 could be his age. In a first step, from 1958 to early 1962, president de Gaulle had to concentrate his energy on a peaceful settlement of the Algerian War (and the decolonisation process). From 1962 onwards, as soon as the Algerian issue was settled in spring 1962, de Gaulle began to adopt a more assertive policy towards Europe. The second Fouchet plan that in 1962 aimed to create a new European organization based exclusively on inter-governmental principles, and the first rejection of Great Britain's application to join the EEC in 1963 are example of this approach (Ludlow, P., 1997). In a third step, from 1965 onwards, de Gaulle became more and more provocative, for example with the Empty Chair-crisis of 1965-66, the partial retreat of NATO in 1966, his speech at Phnom Penh in 1966 which questioned the American involvement in Vietnam, or his speech in Montréal in 1967, which was interpreted by some as expressing support for the independence of the French-speaking region of Québec from Canada. Moreover, his trips to Eastern Europe in 1967-68 provide hints of a willingness to also challenge the post-war dual order of the Cold War. The provocativeness and directness that de Gaulle used in these events could be explained, according to several specialists of de Gaulle (Lacouture, J., 1986: 557; Quagliariello, G., 2007: 455), by his age: he was 75 in 1965, and was set on achieving as much as possible before his retirement. In short, his personality and personal background triggered the approach towards the European political project that became expressed in his policy when he returned to power in 1958. This dynamic was subsequently radicalised [is something missing to end this sentence - what was radicalised? (The approach towards the European political project)]

### **Charles de Gaulle's European Foreign Policy – ideas and practices**

From 1958 to 1969, de Gaulle applied his foreign policy with a great continuity. He benefited from the fact that France was one of the two remaining medium-sized political powers in Western Europe. As Great Britain had refused participation in the supranational EEC which was promoted by the political leaders of the Six, France was of course a central actor in the process of European integration. As the largest country in Western Europe, a former colonial power with military bases in the whole world and a nuclear power from 1960 onwards, France also played a central role in NATO.

De Gaulle used these strengths to develop a policy with three important features. Firstly, he supported an inter-governmental core Europe, for example with his project of the Fouchet Plan in 1959-1962 which was an attempt to control the EEC by developing an intergovernmental organisation of cooperation between the Six, or the

Empty Chair Crisis in 1965 that was designed to revise the Treaty of Rome by diminishing the EEC Commission's powers. He developed his vision in very famous speeches such as the press conference of 5 September 1960 in which he criticised the federalist vision of Europe in order to defend his project of an intergovernmental political union of Europe (De Gaulle, C., 1960). He stated that the sole "reality" upon which a Europe could be built was the nation-state. The notions of "European people" or of "European government" were dismissed as "chimera". The EEC Commission was seen as a mere "technical" institution without any "political authority". During the Empty Chair Crisis, he clearly attacked the federalists: "Now, we know - heaven knows that we know! - that there was a different concept of a European federation in which, according to the dreams of those who conceived it, the countries would lose their national personalities, and in which, furthermore, for want of a federator - such as, in the West, Caesar and his successors, Charlemagne, Otto I, Charles V, Napoleon and Hitler tried to be, each in his fashion, and such as in the East, Stalin tried to be - would be ruled by technocratic, a stateless and irresponsible Areopagus.<sup>5</sup> We know also that France is opposing this project, which contradicts all reality, with a plan for organized co-operation among the States, evolving, doubtlessly, toward a confederation" (De Gaulle, C., 1965). For de Gaulle, the term "confederation" was a byword for "intergovernmental Europe". De Gaulle did not hesitate to associate the federalist project with the greatest threat for Europe's people such as Hitler or Stalin. Lastly, he pointed to the technocratic feature of the EEC supranational institutions, as their members were not elected but appointed (by elected government, though).

Secondly, de Gaulle rejected the involvement of Great Britain in the continental European collaboration at three times: in November 1958 when he rejected the Free Trade Area, in January 1963 when he refused the first British application to the EEC, and in November 1967 when he dismissed it for the second time. This meant that while de Gaulle rejected Great-Britain's involvement, he wanted to preserve the French influence in the European Community.

Thirdly, de Gaulle defended an international policy intended to overcome the Cold War order, that is to say the division of the world in two camps dominated by two superpowers. De Gaulle did not reject the American alliance but he wanted France to be accepted as a major player in the Western camp. That is why he pro-

---

<sup>5</sup> The Areopagus was the most senior Court in Ancient Athens.



posed a memorandum designed to reform the NATO in September 1958 with a view to establishing a hegemonic order consisting of three countries (the United States, Great Britain and France) rather than merely the United States. The memorandum is based on ideas that had been developed within the French civil service since 1953 (Soutou, G.-H., 1996: 71). The failure of the proposal, nevertheless led to a French retreat from the integrated military structure of NATO in 1966. US military bases in France subsequently had to be evacuated. Moreover, de Gaulle tried to promote the French voice, different from the USSR and from the US. This is visible in his attempt to create a specific French path in Eastern Europe in 1966-68 (Vaisse, M., 1998). As a liberal and a democrat, de Gaulle stayed firmly in the Western bloc, but he tried to promote a third way between the two camps of the Cold War, in which he tried to engage the five other member states of the EEC with the slogan of a “*European Europe*”. This should be seen in opposition to the notion of a US-influenced Europe (De Gaulle, 1964).

These three features of de Gaulle’s European policy were seen as being complementary. They were based on the same willingness to assert the French nation-state, to pursue a policy of *grandeur*, and therefore also to use European institutions as a proxy to strengthen French influence in the world. Even after de Gaulle’s demise, his ideas have deeply influenced both the French foreign policy and the style of its diplomats. According to the former diplomat Charles Cogan:

“De Gaulle’s idea was that weakness had to be, and could be, overcome by intransigence. [...] What appeals most to later French negotiators about the Gaullist approach is that it seemed to work. In the 1960s, although France was not at the center of the world, de Gaulle captured more than a fair share of the world’s attention” (Cogan, C., 2003: 87).

This explains why several features of the Gaullist diplomatic style - intransigence, reluctance to compromise, and highly ambitious statements - are still influential in French diplomacy. De Gaulle’s assertive policy is a source of strength for the audience of his ideas. Their influence and resilience do not mean, however, that this policy always succeeded. Their weaknesses are obvious, and from such a point of view it is also possible to point to the temptation of granting a “heroic approach” to de Gaulle’s role in post-war European history.

### **The limits of De Gaulle’s European policy and the “heroic” approach**

Studying in-depth an important character’s idea of Europe does not necessarily mean adopting a “heroic” approach to history or replicating myths. It is important

to be aware of the limits of de Gaulle’s ideas, both from an intellectual point of view, and in terms of actors. To begin with, the rationality of de Gaulle’s ideas could be contested. The mere fact that France was committed to “*Grandeur*” relies on a basic inequality: France must be one of the main guides of the other nations (Grosser, A., 1991: 504). This is a source of weakness in international relations, especially if this purpose is expressed bluntly, as de Gaulle did not hesitate to do.<sup>6</sup> This approach was also counter-productive, especially in front of the smaller countries in Western Europe that also needed to defend their own situation in this context. This was for example the case of the Netherlands in the 1960s (Ludlow, P., 2005, 64-5, 85 and 155).

Moreover, de Gaulle’s education at the end of the “long 19<sup>th</sup> century” (1789-1914) was a disadvantage for him to understand some of the novelties of political life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as the new communist and federalist ideologies or supranational institutions. De Gaulle underestimated the strength of the Communist ideology among Soviet and Eastern Europe leaders and thus the cohesion of the Soviet bloc during his period in power. That is why his attempt to dissociate some of the Eastern countries from the USSR failed. In respect of European integration, he did not understand precisely how the EEC institutions worked – something that he in fact shared with many other politicians in the 1960s that faced difficulties with grasping the power of these new types of institutions. In 1958, when he returned to power, he thought that the EEC was a mere “*commercial treaty*”, without real independent institutions (Warlouzet, L. (2010): 485). From 1958 to 1965, de Gaulle fostered a “*revisionist*” strategy, designed to give a more intergovernmental stance to the EEC institutions (Warlouzet, L. (2010): 244-254). This policy shows that he deliberately underestimated the power of these political institutions and the strength of legally binding international agreements. He thought that only the political actions of state actors would matter. The formation of de Gaulle’s ideas had happened during a completely different era than his exercise of power sixty years later, and this may also explain why de Gaulle’s policy sometimes had a limited success.

These difficulties led to the development of an internal opposition against de Gaulle among some French politicians and high-ranking civil servants. French diplomats were often put in an awkward situation by the blunt style of de Gaulle’s discourses, even if they agreed with the core of his message. In the end, it was

---

<sup>6</sup> See the first page of his memoirs, published as soon as 1954 (De Gaulle, C., *Mémoires de guerre. 1, L’appel : 1940-1942*, Plon, 1954): “ [...]la France n’est réellement elle-même qu’au premier rang [...]».



not only the style but also the substance which triggered an internal reaction, for example after the Montréal discourse of July 1967 (Vaïsse, M.: 294-300). Internal opposition against de Gaulle's EEC policy was also found among high ranking civil servants that were close advisors to de Gaulle on European integration (Warlouzet, L. (2009)). They supported de Gaulle and his emphasis on a certain French national interest, but thought that this aim was not fulfilled with the inflexible policy chosen by the French president. From the Empty Chair Crisis onwards, these Gaullist opponents stressed three main flaws of the French EEC policy. Firstly, it was too concentrated on the common agricultural policy (CAP). This hindered the promotion of other French economic projects especially in the area of industrial policy. Moreover, this policy triggered heavy side-effects such as a huge cost, a concentration of subsidies on the richest farmers, a reinforcement of supra-national institutions and, most of all, frequent paralysis of the EEC during agricultural negotiations. Secondly, the simple rejection of Great-Britain in 1967 was seen by his opponents as clumsy and illogical. This was not least because in 1967, the British application was widely considered to be far more respectful of the EEC dynamic than the first application (Ludlow, P., 2003). Most believed that London had demonstrated good will and determination to access. Therefore, the consequence of this rejection was worse for France. In particular, the EEC decision-making process was frozen for a large number of projects, especially those interesting France, such as technological policy for example (Warlouzet, L., 2010, 444-458). Moreover, Great-Britain could have reinforced both the intergovernmental interpretation of the Rome Treaty and several economical projects supported by France (in industrial policy) according to several of these civil servants. Thirdly, the revisionist strategy of de Gaulle's policy who? towards the EEC institutions was also seen as pointless by them, not because they were federalists per se, but because they believed that the method was too inconsiderate to actually be efficient.

Such limits of de Gaulle's vision and the internal opposition are not mentioned in the Gaullist and the "Gaullist-centred" literature. Instead, the CAP is widely seen as a success of the French European policy. This literature adopts the Gaullist vision and puts an emphasis on political issues (Howorth, 2006). Consequently, in many general studies on the French EEC policy important economic and institutional questions which have been fundamental in the shaping of the EEC - such as the role of the ECJ, and the debate between competition policy and industrial policy - are ignored.

### Conclusion

There is little doubt that de Gaulle played a central role in post-war European political history, because of a strong personal vision on the role of France in Europe and in the world that developed very early in his life. His ideas were boldly applied when he was in power, especially from 1958 to 1969, and defended consistently firstly by de Gaulle himself, then by his supporters. A large numbers of historians maintain a "de Gaulle-centred" approach to this history, and their writings have furthered the myths surrounding him, regardless of whether they sympathise with his policy.

More generally, a biographical approach to the history of Europe is useful to discuss the influence of individual characters and their ideas not only on the decision-making process, but also on long-term features of national culture. Meanwhile, it is also important to stress the limits of a single characters' set of ideas. One way of doing this is by showing the discrepancy between their ambitions, their implementation and their outcomes. A comprehensive biographical approach could serve to deepen our understanding of the post-war European integration history while at the same time avoiding the "heroic" approach which has been taken by many historians so far.

*Laurent Warlouzet is Ph.D. in History, Lecturer in History at the University of Arras in France, and post-doctoral researcher - Jean Monnet Fellow - at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy.*

### Bibliography

- Agulhon, M. (2000): *De Gaulle, histoire, symbole, mythe*. Paris: Plon.
- Berstein, S. (2001): *Histoire du gaullisme*. Paris: Perrin.
- Cogan, C. (2003): *French Negotiating Behavior. Dealing with La Grande Nation*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- De Gaulle, C. (1954): *Mémoires de guerre*. 3 vol. Paris: Plon, 1954
- De Gaulle, C. (1960): Press conference of 5 September 1960.  
[http://www.ena.lu/press\\_conference\\_held\\_charles\\_gaulle\\_september\\_1960-020002347.html](http://www.ena.lu/press_conference_held_charles_gaulle_september_1960-020002347.html)  
(accessed March 2010).
- De Gaulle, C. (1964): Press conference of 23 July 1964.  
<http://www.ina.fr/fresques/de-gaulle/Html/PrincipaleAccueil.php> (accessed March 2010).



- De Gaulle, C. (1965): Press conference of 9 September 1965. <http://www.ena.lu/press-conference-held-charles-gaulle-september-1965-020002252.html> (accessed March 2010).
- De Gaulle, C. (1971): *Mémoires d'espoir*, 2 vols. Paris: Plon.
- De Gaulle, C., (1994a [1924]): *La défaite chez l'ennemi*. Paris: Plon.
- De Gaulle, C., (1994b [1932]): *Le fil de l'épée*. Paris: Plon.
- De Gaulle, C. (1994c [1934]): *Vers l'armée de métier*. Paris: Plon.
- De Gaulle, C. (1984-1987): *Lettres, notes et Carnets*. 11 vols. Paris: Plon.
- Ellison, J. (2007): *The United States, Britain and the transatlantic crisis: rising to the Gaullist challenge, 1963-1968*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grosser, A. (1991): "Pour l'admiration critique, contre l'adulation mystifiante". In: Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.), *De Gaulle en son siècle, vol. 1 : Dans la mémoire des hommes et des peuples*. Paris: Plon, pp. 503-505.
- Haas, E. (1958): *The Uniting of Europe*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hoffmann, S. (1966): "Obstinate or Obsolete ? The Fate of the Nation-State and the Case of Western Europe". In: *Daedalus*, vol. 95: 892-908.
- Howorth, J. (2006), "Europe". In Andrieu, C.; Braud, P.; Piketty, G. (dir.): *Dictionnaire de Gaulle*. Paris: Robert Laffont, pp. 462-466.
- Kaiser, W. (2008): "Transnational networks in European governance: the informal politics of integration". In Kaiser, W.; Leucht, B.; Rasmusen, M. (éd.): *The History of the European Union. Origins of a trans- and supranational polity, 1950-1972*. London: Routledge, pp. 12-33.
- Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.) (1990): *Nouvelle bibliographie internationale sur Charles de Gaulle, 1980-1990*. Paris: Plon.
- Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.) (1991): *De Gaulle en son siècle. Vol. 1 : Dans la mémoire des hommes et des peuples*. Paris: Plon.
- Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.) (1992a): *De Gaulle en son siècle. Sondages et enquêtes d'opinion*. Paris: Plon.
- Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.) (1992b): *De Gaulle en son siècle. Vol. 3 : Moderniser la France*. Paris: Plon.
- Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.) (1992c): *De Gaulle en son siècle. Vol. 5 : l'Europe*. Paris : Plon.
- Jackson, J. (2004 [English : 2003]): *De Gaulle. Au-delà de la légende*. Paris: Alvik.
- Jouve, E. (1967): *Le général de Gaulle et la construction de l'Europe (1940-1966)*. Paris: LGDJ.
- Lacouture, J. (1984a): *De Gaulle. Tome 1: Le rebelle (1890-1944)*. Paris: Seuil, 1984.
- Lacouture, J. (1984b): *De Gaulle. Tome 2: Le politique (1944-1959)*. Paris: Seuil, 1984.
- Lacouture, J. (1986): *De Gaulle. Tome 3 : Le souverain (1959-1970)*. Paris: Seuil, 1986.
- Lacouture, J. (1991): "Une longue marche". In Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.): *De Gaulle en son siècle. Volume 1: Dans la mémoire des hommes et des peuples*. Paris: Plon, pp. 507-512.
- Ledwidge, B. (1984 [English: 1982]): *De Gaulle*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Lindberg, L. (1963): *Political Dynamics of European Integration*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ludlow, P. (1997): *Dealing with Britain. The Six and the first UK application to the EEC*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ludlow, P. (2001): "The Eclipse of the Extremes. Demythologising the Luxembourg Compromise". In Loth, W. (éd.): *Crisis and Compromises: The European project, 1963-1969*. Bruxelles: Bruylant: 247-264.
- Ludlow, P. (2003): "A Short-Term Defeat: The Community Institutions and the Second British Application to join the EEC". In Daddow, O. (ed.): *Harold Wilson and European Integration. Britain's Second Application to join the EEC*. London: Frank Cass, pp. 135-150.
- Ludlow, P. (2005): *The European Community and the Crises of the 1960s. Negotiating the Gaullist challenge*. London: Routledge.
- Moravcsik, A. (1999), *The Choice for Europe. Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. London: UCL Press.



Noer, P. (2006), *Denmark and the Gaullist vision : government and Civil Society Reactions to the Fifth Republic and its European Policies, 1958-1969*. PhD, European University Institute, Florence.

Nora, P. (1991): "L'historien devant de Gaulle". In Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.), *De Gaulle en son siècle. Vol. 1 : Dans la mémoire des hommes et des peuples*. Paris: Plon, pp. 172-178.

Nora, P. (1997): "Gaullistes et communistes". In Nora, P. (dir.): *Les lieux de mémoires. Les France, 2*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

Olivi, B.; Giacone, A. (2007) : *L'Europe difficile. Histoire politique de la construction européenne*. Paris: Folio histoire.

Palayret, J.-M; Wallace, H.; Winand, P. (eds) (2006): *Visions, Votes and Vetoes. The Empty Chair Crisis and the Luxembourg Compromise. Forty Years On*. Bruxelles: Peter Lang.

Peyrefitte, A. (1994a): *C'était de Gaulle. Vol. 1: 1961-1963*. Paris: Fayard.

Peyrefitte, A. (1994b): *C'était de Gaulle. Vol. 2: 1963-1966*. Paris: Fayard.

Peyrefitte, A. (2001): *C'était de Gaulle. Vol. 3: 1966-1968*. Paris: Fayard.

Quagliariello, G. (2007): *La religion Gaulliste*, Paris: Perrin.

Rioux, J.-P. (1991): "Le Souverain en mémoire (1969-1990)". In Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.), *De Gaulle en son siècle. Vol. 1. : Dans la mémoire des hommes et des peuples*. Paris: Plon, 1991, pp. 303-341.

Soutou, G.-H. (1996): *L'alliance incertaine. Les rapports politico-stratégiques franco-allemands, 1954-1996*. Paris: Fayard.

Soutou, G.-H. (2001): "France and the Cold War, 1944-1963". In *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol.12, no. 4: 35-52.

Vaïsse, M. (1998): *La Grandeur. Politique étrangère du général de Gaulle, 1958-1969*. Paris: Fayard.

Warlouzet, L. (2008): "France and the Treaty of Rome. Negotiation and implementation (1956-1974)". In: Gehler, M. (ed.), *From Common Market to European Union Building. 50th anniversary of the Rome Treaties 1957-2007*. Weimar: Böhlau: 541-555.

Warlouzet, L. (2009): "The Deadlock: The choice of the CAP by de Gaulle and its impact on French EEC policy (1958-69)". In Patel, K. (ed.), *Fertile Ground for Europe? The History of European Integration and the Common Agricultural Policy since 1945*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, pp. 99-118.

Warlouzet, L. (2010): *Le choix de la CEE par la France. Les débats économiques de Pierre Mendès-France à Charles de Gaulle (1955-1969)*. Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France.

Winock, M. (1991): "Intervention". In Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.), *De Gaulle en son siècle. Vol. 1: Dans la mémoire des hommes et des peuples*. Paris: Plon, pp. 520-523.

Charles de Gaulle, the French President from 1959 to 1969, developed a very specific vision of Europe, which was applied boldly when he was in charge. His ideas have had a lasting legacy on many historians – and not only in France who have adopted a “de Gaulle-centered” approach to the History of Europe in the 1960s. Do you want to read the rest of this article? Request full-text. Citations (2). References (0). European democracy deferred: de Gaulle and the Dehousse Plan, 1960. Article. Apr 2017. How Charles de Gaulle’s story became a collective fairy tale that the French have agreed to believe in. The myth of de Gaulle is all the more remarkable considering the number of contradictions it has absorbed. The French Army commander who grew up in a Catholic household spent most of his career squaring off against the military and the church. In the end, de Gaulle had never had a “certain idea” of Algeria except to be rid of the country, and by the time his government was willing to make vague offers of more political representation for Algerian Muslims, it was too late. In any case, de Gaulle was not about to let Algerians immigrate en masse into France or, as he joked, to see the name of his home town changed to “Colombey-les-Deux-Mosquées.”