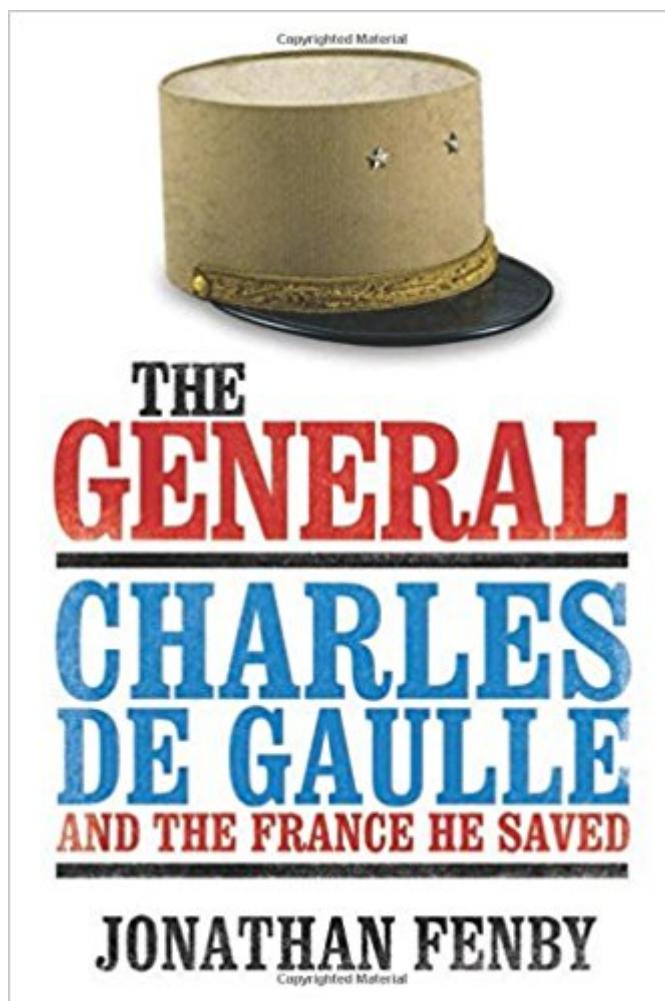


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# The General: Charles De Gaulle And The France He Saved



## Synopsis

No leader of modern times was more uniquely patriotic than Charles de Gaulle. As founder and first president of the Fifth Republic, General de Gaulle saw himself as "carrying France on [his] shoulders." In his twenties, he fought for France in the trenches and at the epic battle of Verdun. In the 1930s, he waged a lonely battle to enable France to better resist Hitler and Germany. Thereafter, he twice rescued the nation from defeat and decline by extraordinary displays of leadership, political acumen, daring, and bluff, heading off civil war and leaving a heritage adopted by his successors of right and left. "Le Général", as he became known from 1940 on, appeared as if he was carved from a single monumental block, but was in fact extremely complex, a man with deep personal feelings and recurrent mood swings, devoted to his family and often seeking reassurance from those around him. This is a magisterial, sweeping biography of one of the great leaders of the twentieth century and of the country with which he so identified himself. Written with terrific verve, narrative skill, and rigorous detail, the first major work on de Gaulle in fifteen years brings alive as never before the private man as well as the public leader through exhaustive research and analysis.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jonathan Fenby's biography, entitled simply *The General*, is large but not overweight. . . . While not hiding de Gaulle's vanities and conceits (more highlighted than alleviated by odd moments of self-doubt), Mr. Fenby does not question that de Gaulle supplied his disheartened countrymen with a necessary myth, about himself and about France's place in the world; he made

little distinction between the two. . . . Mr. Fenby misses little in the way of nice detail. (The Wall Street Journal) A keen biography conveying the French general's driving sense of destiny. . . . With a nod to previous (French) studies by Jean Lacouture, Eric Roussel, Alain Peyrefitte, as well as the general's own extensive memoirs, this work is astute and psychologically probing. (Kirkus) Fenby's will be an obligatory purchase. (Booklist) "Dare I call a 707-page biography a page-turner? For once, the fake enthusiasm of blurb prose rings true. I did 'finish the book in one sitting,' as another chestnut has it, though the sitting was a very flight of 16 hours. And why? Because Jonathan Fenby, a former editor of The Observer of London and a prolific author, knows how to turn breadth and depth into enthrallment. (Joseph Joffe - The New York Times Book Review)

Jonathan Fenby is a former editor of the Observer and the South China Morning Post, and is a former bureau chief in France for the Economist and Reuters. He is the author of ten books, including the acclaimed biography Chiang Kai-Shek: China's Generalissimo and the Nation He Lost and The Sinking of the Lancastria, which tells the story of the greatest disaster in British naval history. He was made a commander of the British Empire and a knight of the French Order of Merit for services to journalism. He lives in London.

This excellent biography is a manual on statecraft. De Gaulle, in my view, was one of the greatest diplomats the 20th century, presiding over France's transformation from a defeated nation in 1940 to a major power with a permanent seat in the Security Council. His audacity as leader of the Free French - the almost super-human display of courage, obduracy, pride and calculation - in face of obstacles that could crush lesser mortals marks him out as a truly great man. There is also a lesson in his single-minded pursuit of the glory of France even in defeat. Great men, like De Gaulle, (and Churchill or David Ben Gurion or Nehru or Ho Chi Minh) are able to keep their eye fixed on goals beyond the horizon and prod their people forward with their inflexible wills to distant destinations. They are also only too human, and this biography exposes De Gaulle's political opportunism and his vanity. Big people have big talents and big shortcomings and the account of De Gaulle's creation and stewardship of the Fifth Republic focusses unblinkingly on all of them. A great biography and a great work of history. The sheer force of De Gaulle's personality, admirably described by the author, is perhaps the most important take-away from this book.

I found Mr. Fenby to be a careful writer, one who respects his subject yet retains a sense of

perspective. Charles de Gaulle will always be a figure of controversy, even with his compatriots, and Mr. Fenby includes both achievements and blunders by M. de Gaulle with fairness. He uses humor where appropriate but has no hesitation in criticizing M. de Gaulle's failures. I admire M. de Gaulle, as do the French with whom I am acquainted, but like them I am not blind to his overreaching opinion of his own vision and abilities. Mr. Fenby's treatment of his subject gives the reader a balanced and detailed look at the life of one of France's most enduring figures and the history of his times.

Fendy's new biography on Charles de Gaulle is a welcome worthwhile contribution of our understanding and appreciation for a man and his times. This is an excellent portrayal of one very complex, brilliant, conflicted, paranoid and ultimately important and critical leader. He has foibles galore along with the self importance, bravado and confidence (and perhaps arrogance) of a thousand peacocks. My own thought is that it is probably best for those pre-disposed with a curiosity for de Gaulle rather than a random reader of biography. On June 18, 1940 Charles de Gaulle made his first and now most famous speech from the BBC in London to launch the French Resistance and declare that there were no legitimate rulers in France, squarely breaking with and opposing his old commander Marshal Philippe Pétain, France's biggest hero of the Great War and the leader of the Vichy government. He was an obscure soldier only recently promoted from Colonel to one star General, hardly the only resistance and not an obvious figure to rally around by either the Allies or his countrymen. And yet by force of will, determination, daring and bluff he earned the support of Churchill and Eisenhower and the backing of many French. The Vichy government charged him with treason and sentenced him to prison if he ever returned. For 4 long years he worked day by day to support and build a legitimate army of resistance that France could ultimately rally around and he had the intelligence and presence to pull it off. English written WWII history books are generally not kind to de Gaulle; portraying him as leading a non-existent army into Paris claiming a false glory and implying that there wasn't much else to tell. That's unfair and untrue. His military credentials were well earned. In WWI he was both a courageous soldier and a POW that tried to escape on at least 7 occasions earning harsher treatment with each attempt. Between the wars he was a lonely voice for mechanized warfare and the need for tanks and airplanes. In the early stages of war he led a French tank command that performed admirably. He was hurt in battle in both wars. The book gives a rich account of his dealings with the Allies, particularly Churchill along with his cunning political gains at the expense of other would be French leaders based in North Africa. The middle of the book slows along with de Gaulle's life as he was largely sidelined during

the post war era and not a part of some of the major historical events of the time; Indochina, the Suez Canal or the economic struggle leading to the Marshall Plan. However we are quickly back to the fast pace as de Gaulle is critical to unifying the disparate constituencies fighting over the future of Algeria. This was to me, the meat of the book with both fascinating anecdotes and valuable lessons on the price and complexity of long-term colonial rule. I had not appreciated how close France was to civil war and how the army had gone nearly rogue. It is a moment of high drama. Simultaneously he tears up the constitution and leads the creation of the 5th Republic. Throughout both the the early post WWII era and his Presidency France is struggling with how to bring unity between collaborators and the resistance. Resistance included many communists, socialists and Jews. Collaborators were from the most conservative elements of the Army, Church and Royalists. Both groups have been around for 100 years or more but this was a schism that might not be repairable. Fendy presents how these challenges played out organically (reprisals) and the efforts of de Gaulle to shape them and unify the country. He consistently highlights de Gaulle's overall aim to restore France to the league of greatest nations. He falls short in terms of the hard power won through guns, ammo and money but perhaps unappreciated by de Gaulle he has won the soft power game where French food, culture and thought are welcome and with outsized influence. This is a well delivered biography; fast paced, excellently research and consistent in its objectives.

The General Charles de Gaulle is a thorough analysis of De Gaulle's personality, accomplishments and his place during and after WWII. The reader will have a good sense of the General's motivation, patriotism and self understanding as he self identified with France and tried to make a place for France on the international scene. An easy read it isn't. There is a lot of French politics in the book. Someone who has studied France or who in other ways is conversant with the various currents of French politics will certainly enjoy the book. Nonetheless, so will the average reader interested in where DeGaulle and France fit in after WWII. DeGaulle became the leader of France because he said he was the leader of France. In his mind no proof was needed. He was a remarkable individual worth reading about.

De Gaulle's story traces a line through the major part of the twentieth century that opens an amazing window on the history of the entire world of his time. Besides vividly illuminating the life of a man, destined for a unique role in world history, this narrative illuminates the story of a nation in ways sometimes surprising, but always instructive. A little hard to get into at first, after a few chapters I got sucked in and stayed with it to the end.

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