
Book Review

The lessons of the fall of France

by D. Stephen Pepper

Charles B. DeGaulle, A Biography

by Don Cook

G.B. Putnam's Sons
New York 1983, \$22.95

For the student of statecraft, the fall of France to the German armies of Hitler in 1940 is a case study of a critical moment that found only little people—with the single exception of Charles de Gaulle. At this moment, when tragedy hangs once more over Europe, and the politicians and the generals are once more playing the parts of “little people,” it is worth returning to the events of those far-off days to learn from them what we must, and to take courage from de Gaulle, who was a worthy precursor of today’s founders of the Schiller Institute.

The 40th anniversary of the liberation of Paris will take place on Aug. 25, and a new biography of the General, written by the American journalist Don Cook, is quite helpful in recreating the events of May and June 1940. To read at the same time the first volume of de Gaulle’s own war memoirs, *The Call to Honour*, is to grasp the enormity of the tragedy and the importance to the life of the nation of a figure who possesses a world historical identity. For those of us engaged in building the Schiller Institute at this very moment, history can provide no more powerful lesson.

The crucial period to review is the two weeks from June 5, when de Gaulle was appointed Undersecretary of War (he was kept out of the government until metropolitan France was already militarily prostrate), to June 18, when he broadcast his first appeal to the French nation from London. In these incredible days, a nation whose history teaches us the very meaning of nationhood, dissolved into chaos. For those today whose complacency belies their unspoken fears, the swift dissolution of the orderly processes of government in the days of June 1940 should give pause. De Gaulle has left an indelible memoir of those days:

“All [the governing politicians] made a show of calm and dignity. But it was clear that, in the setting where custom placed them, they were now only usurpers. In the middle of the cyclone, the cabinet meetings—instructions being sent down, reports being sent up—public statements and the procession of officers, civil servants, diplomats, members of parliament, journalists—all with something to report on or to

ask—gave the impression of a sort of phantasmagoria without aim or effect.”

What had brought this state of affairs about was the German blitzkrieg that was launched seriously on May 10. Within three days, motorized columns supported by Stuka dive bombers had breached the French defenses. By May 18, seven Panzer groups were ready to swoop on either Paris or Dunkirk, “having crossed the Maginot line, smashed our positions, and annihilated one of our armies. It can be said that within a week our fate was sealed,” wrote de Gaulle. Nevertheless, the French still had 3,000 modern tanks and 800 motorized machine guns intact, equal in number to the enemy’s. But instead of grouping them into unified mobile units to spearhead a counterattack, they were distributed along the entire front. With the single exception of de Gaulle’s 4th Armored Division, the French tanks never played a serious role. Instead they were committed piecemeal to futile counterattacks and were thereby engulfed and annihilated.

If the German blitzkrieg of 1940 could commit such mayhem in the period of one week, consider the probable effects of infinitely more powerful Soviet mobile units if they were to debouch deep behind NATO front-lines, throwing NATO units into confusion and spreading panic in the population. It is just this danger that General Rogers, Supreme NATO Commander, has warned of.

The political battle

Nevertheless, it was not the defeat in battle that makes so tragic the fall of France; it was the surrender of the nation. The political battle unfolded in all its terrible reality in the first two weeks of June, during which time de Gaulle argued ceaselessly, as Cook chronicles, that defeat in metropolitan France did not mean the end of the war, and that steps should immediately be taken to transport the bulk of France’s fighting force to her North African possessions, and there to form a government-in-exile. Just consider, if you will, how different history would have been had France not abjectly surrendered and thereby rendered useless its huge fighting machine—80% of France’s capabilities. Its fleet, air force, army, and civil service were intact at the time of the armistice. Had a government-in-exile left Bordeaux as de Gaulle urged, to proclaim the continuity of the nation from North Africa, France could have continued to fight. Instead, only de Gaulle

departed in a small plane accompanied by one aide. As Churchill wrote, "De Gaulle carried with him, in this small airplane, the honor of France."

The political defeat, far more disastrous than the military one, resulted from one cause: the littleness of the people called upon to command; not evil people, just little ones. First of all, there was Paul Reynaud, the last prime minister before Vichy. De Gaulle has left us a memoir of him:

"At bottom, the personality of M. Paul Reynaud was the right one for the conditions where it would have been possible to conduct the war within a state in running order and on the basis of traditionally established data. But everything was swept away. In such conditions M. Paul Reynaud's intelligence, his courage, and the authority of his office were, so to speak, running free.

"To seize the reins once more . . . [meant] in short, striking out at all costs from the ordinary framework and procedure in a situation without precedent."

Time and again, Reynaud assured de Gaulle that he would stand firm against the appeasers. And each time he capitulated. In the end, de Gaulle's judgment is more damning than had Reynaud been wrong-headed: "M. Paul Reynaud did not think fit to take upon himself decisions so far outside the normal and calculated orbit. He tried to attain the aim by maneuvering." Therein lay his "littleness." The situation was too harsh for such compromises: "Either make war without sparing anything, or surrender at once: There was no alternative, only these extremes."

Reynaud was by far the best with whom de Gaulle had to deal in those agonizing days. Gen. Maxime Weygand, Commander-in-Chief in June, acted far more dishonorably. But even he was not evil. Of him de Gaulle wrote:

"At one go there had fallen on his shoulders a crushing burden he was not built to bear. . . . Weygand was, in fact, by nature a brilliant second. To take action on one's own responsibility . . . to face destiny alone . . . for these Weygand had neither inclination nor preparation."

Once again, as in the case of Reynaud, it required an outlook and a grandeur totally lacking in the man:

"To face the disaster effectively he would have to renew himself; to break from one day to the next with ideas, a rate of action, a set of methods which no longer applied. . . . He was not the man to do it."

The case of Marshal Pétain

In both cases, once the familiar framework of politics, of procedures, of authority had been stripped away, neither man could summon from within himself the qualities of leadership, of creativity to impose authority upon the situation anew. If this were true of Reynaud and Weygand, how much more true of Pétain.

Marshal Pétain is so identified with Vichy that little else is remembered of him. But he was the hero of Verdun, and de Gaulle was his protégé. Perhaps de Gaulle's greatest word

portrait was of the ancient Marshal, who by then had become his chief antagonist:

"Too proud for intrigue, too forceful for mediocrity, too ambitious to be a time-server, he nourished in his solitude a passion for domination, which had long been hardened by

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his consciousness of his own value, the setbacks he had encountered, and the contempt he had for others. . . . In the extreme winter of his life, events were offering to his gifts and pride the opportunity to expand without limits; on one condition, however: that he should accept disaster as his elevation's escutcheon and should adorn it with his glory.

". . . But alas the outer shell of years had gnawed his character. Age was delivering him over to the maneuvers of people who were clever at covering themselves with his majestic lassitude."

To illustrate the quality of de Gaulle's judgment, I digress here to quote his appreciation of Douglas MacArthur:

"MacArthur was besieged in the Bataan peninsula. What I knew of this general made me esteem him highly. I spoke [of him] as follows: 'As a soldier and an ally, I must tell you that the disappearance of MacArthur would be a great misfortune. There are only a few first class leaders in our camp. He is one of them. He must not be lost. But he is lost unless his government gives him the order to personally leave Bataan. . . . I think this order ought to be given him and am asking you to make General de Gaulle's opinion on this subject known to President Roosevelt.'"

Even Pétain was not an evil man, but in old age, littleness had seized and led him by the nose. The collaborators, the Laval's and the Darlans, the evil ones, could not have played the role they did were it not for the smallness of the "good men."

This fall of France was a tragedy that really happened, that destroyed Reynaud, Weygand, Pétain and many more "good" men. Lest we are condemned to repeat it, we should learn its lessons. Weinberger, Abrahamson, and Reagan are good men. So are Kohl and Wörner. But do we think for a moment that they, stripped of the formulae of power, could preserve the West? Not a chance. It is we of the Schiller Institute who will have to instruct them in the ways of courage, to give them the grit to face reality. Like de Gaulle, we know what it is to be "like a man on the shore of an ocean proposing to swim across."