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**Fondation Charles de Gaulle**, *Avec de Gaulle: témoignages. Tome 1, La Guerre et la Libération (1939-1945)*. Paris: Nouveau monde édition, 2003. 251 pp. €26.00 (pb.) ISBN 2-84736-026-3.

**Fondation Charles de Gaulle**, *Avec De Gaulle: témoignages. Tome 2, Le temps du rassemblement, (1946-1958)*. Paris, Nouveau monde édition, 2005. 502 pp. €29.00 (pb.) ISBN 2-84736-053-0.

Review by Charles Cogan, Harvard University.

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The two volumes under review are the first of what will be a five-volume oral history of the career of the man whom René Coty labeled, “the most illustrious of Frenchmen,” at the moment that Coty, then President of the terminally ill Fourth Republic, felt compelled to suggest that Charles de Gaulle be brought back to power. This was in May 1958 when de Gaulle, after twelve long years of a “crossing of the desert,” as the French expression goes, made his political comeback. He would have preferred it sooner. “I’m ten years too old,” he told his niece at the time. (II, 256). De Gaulle reigned (I cannot think of a better word) from 1958 until 1969, having created, in François Furet’s words, a “monarchy of the Republic.”[1] He died a year later, in 1970.

Each of these volumes has oral histories of, respectively, eighteen and thirty-one witnesses of the period, as recorded at the de Gaulle Foundation, and as drawn from a bank of 150 oral histories there. Transcribed and edited, each volume is accompanied by an introduction and by biographical material on the witnesses. In addition there are many helpful footnotes elucidating the personae and the events mentioned in the testimonies. The palette of interviewees is rather limited but nevertheless interesting. Some notable figures are interviewed, such as Yves Guéna, Paul Delouvrier, Donnedieu de Vabres, and Maurice Faure—the latter being one of the rare ones who is not a Gaullist and makes no bones about it. Many of the witnesses are wartime companions of de Gaulle and, with a few exceptions, quite favorable to him and the decisions he made. But this is not hagiography pure and simple. There are many enlightening elements that come out of these interviews.

The first of these volumes, *La guerre et la Libération*, covers the period of de Gaulle’s wartime experience, 1939-1945, up until his abrupt resignation as President at the beginning of the following year. The second volume, *Le temps du Rassemblement (1946-1958)*, is focused on de Gaulle’s ultimately failed attempt to create a political movement around himself, following which came his “crossing of the desert,” referred to above, during which he wrote his war memoirs, whose elegance and profundity surprised and dazzled the French public. Then, more than twelve years after his resignation, he returned again to power.

Why did it take de Gaulle so long and what were his missteps along the way? Firstly, and in *filigrane*, there is a strong aversion in much of the French public to a military man taking power. There is the example of Napoleon I who, after moments of extraordinary glory, went down to crushing defeat brought on by his own demonic ambition; and the even more unfortunate example of his less-talented nephew, Napoleon III, who began France’s long downward slide from the summit of European continental powers with his surrender on the battlefield to the Prussians in 1870.

To put this aversion in more contemporary, and arguably exaggerated, terms, there is the view of Olivier Guichard, who fits the description of “Gaullist baron” perhaps better than anyone else: “The only permanent sentiment in France is anti-Gaullism. Anti-Gaullism has always had a mass following in

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France and hence an extraordinary impact.” (II, 274). So, de Gaulle had a lot going against him. Only a few followed him in June 1940, when he went into an act of disobedience on a national scale, defying as an individual the right of the existing French Government to conclude an armistice with Germany. As de Gaulle wrote of Admiral John Jellicoe, the commander of the British fleet which had failed to follow up its advantage at the battle of Jutland in 1915: “He has all the qualities of Nelson except one: he doesn’t know how to [2].”

But de Gaulle also had a lot going for him. By the end of World War II he had gained massive support, and this was proven to him on June 14, 1944, when he returned to France and made his first public appearance at Bayeux. As he told Raymond Triboulet, that date was as important to him as when he made his first appeal to the French people not to accept peace with Germany: “On 18 June 1940, I made my appeal to [continue the] fight. But I was not sure that I had popular sanction in France” (II, 462). The crowds at Bayeux, anxious to meet the man who fit the legend, and even more so the masses of people who witnessed the parade that de Gaulle led down the Champs-Élysées on 26 August 1944, left no doubt.

And what did de Gaulle do with his popularity? One of his leading Resistance supporters, Pierre Brossolette, who leaped to his death from Gestapo offices on Avenue Foch rather than endure further torture, advised de Gaulle to create a mass political party at the war’s end. De Gaulle, sprung as he was from a monarchical, Catholic and anti-parliamentary background, and deeply suspicious of French political parties and their “poisonous” political games, declined to do so. Perhaps also, de Gaulle might have judged that creating his own party at the moment of Liberation might have unnecessarily alienated the powerful Communist Party.

Above all, de Gaulle wanted to remain within the bounds of “Republican legality,” all the while that his enemies were portraying him as a Bonapartist man on horseback. He received endorsement by referendum of the creation of a Constituent Assembly that would have a limited duration and would not in the meantime exercise the executive power that he, as provisional president, enjoyed. It eventually took two constituent assemblies to create a Constitution for a new (Fourth) Republic that was not very different from the pre-war Third, with its powerful parliament and a weak executive.

Harassed and obstructed in parliament by the powerful Communist Party, by the also influential Socialist Party, and by a new Christian Democratic party under the name of the Popular Republican Movement (MRP), de Gaulle suddenly resigned from the presidency of the Provisional Republic in January 1946, expecting to be called back soon, which, however, did not happen for another 12 years.

De Gaulle’s resignation was preceded by a protracted debate over Parliament’s desire to savage military credits and by a particularly bitter exchange between de Gaulle and Edouard Herriot who, as President of the Chamber of Deputies, had abstained on the vote of July 10, 1940 that turned over full powers to Marshall Philippe Pétain. Criticized on the issue of decorations issued to French forces who, on orders of Admiral François Darlan, opposed the Anglo-American landings in North Africa in November 1942, de Gaulle replied: “How can one tear away from the coffins of the dead and the chests of the wounded decorations obtained in frightful circumstances but for which they were not responsible?” And de Gaulle added, in an allusion to Herriot’s abstention in 1940: “I have never had anything to do with Vichy or with the enemy [Germany] except at the point of a gun!” (II, 452).

Apart from his sudden resignation in January 1946, what were the errors of de Gaulle along the way in his decade-too-late return to power? Firstly, there is the matter of the rules behind the creation of the *Rassemblement du Peuple Français* (RPF), when de Gaulle, partly due to his family background, insisted on calling it a movement rather than a political party. De Gaulle had no objection to a member

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belonging to the *Rassemblement* as well as to another political party, but the other parties, one after another, refused this idea, to the RPF's ultimate detriment.

Secondly, there was the timing of de Gaulle's decision to take the parliamentary route in an attempt to gain power. Not having chosen to create a mass party at the end of World War II, de Gaulle formed the RPF in the spring of 1947 which turned out to be an ill-chosen moment. Although the RPF did very well in the municipal elections that October, winning over most of France's cities, there was not to be a national legislative election until 1951. There was nothing the RPF could do in the meantime in terms of a parliamentary return to power. Some of the interviewees in these oral histories thought it would have been better to form the RPF shortly before the 1951 elections.

Thirdly, there was the matter of the grouping of electoral lists (*apparentements*), an arrangement brought into being by de Gaulle's opponents (the so-called Third Force of Socialists, Radicals and MRP) in the electoral law of 1951: candidates for the National Assembly could arrange to combine their votes with those of a candidate of another political party in the same constituency. The law stipulated that, under the proportional single-ballot voting system, two different lists could announce that they were grouping together. In such an option, the votes of the two lists could be combined. Furthermore, if the two lists together totaled an absolute majority, this grouping could be awarded all the seats available in the particular constituency (II, 77).

Except in a very few cases, de Gaulle would not buy into this arrangement, given his aversion to French political parties, in contrast to his own *Rassemblement*. The result was that the RPF, instead of gaining some 300 seats received only 120, and the bell began to toll for the RPF. It was disbanded in 1955. The RPF experience did however create a cadre of political workers who were to be useful in the upheaval of 1958 that brought de Gaulle back to power, and in the governing years that followed.

In his long "crossing of the desert," de Gaulle had to emphasize two contradictory themes, according to Olivier Guichard (II, 285). Firstly, he had to affirm to his interlocutors that he would adhere strictly to Republican legality. At the same time, he did not want to discourage his followers from working towards his return to power.

In early 1958, with de Gaulle out of power for 12 years (and banned from state-controlled French radio), an astonishing 42 per cent of those polled in France thought he would return to power—such were the weaknesses and failings of the Fourth Republic, notably in the Suez fiasco of 1956.

De Gaulle sensed that this was a moment in his favor, notably because of the frustrating Algerian war (which had become a draftee war and not a volunteer war like Indochina). But he had to act very carefully—encouraging his followers in Algeria on the one hand but on the other not becoming associated with an army coup there (which did in fact take place in Algiers on May 13, 1958). As de Gaulle told René Hostache (II, 304-05), "People want me to speak [out] about Algeria but I will not do so as long as the situation is not ripe, because you can't create a movement from whole cloth.... Napoleon Bonaparte won victory at Austerlitz. on 2 December 05. He would not have won it eight days earlier or eight days later at a place other than Austerlitz."

What is striking about the interviews in these oral histories is how awestruck these interlocutors are before the austere and very tall General. Secondly, there is the gentle courtesy with which the General receives them, and thirdly how little they came to know him intimately. De Gaulle's gallantry and kindness toward women is repeatedly emphasized. Although he gave women the vote in 1945, in part in recognition of their wartime role in the Resistance), he was not particularly a feminist and did not seek expressly to promote women to high positions.

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De Gaulle's mood was often downbeat and his humor caustic. When a General who had been on the courts-martial that condemned him to death in 1940 advanced gingerly into his office after the war, he was greeted, as de Gaulle stood to his feet, with the word, "Fire!"

Perhaps most notably it is de Gaulle's stubbornness and impetuosity, not only in resigning in January 1946, all the while expecting to be called back shortly by the French people, but also in refusing cooperation with candidates of other parties, that led to his movement's downfall in the legislative elections of 1951.

Whatever his faults, including his talent for deciding rather than negotiating, as one of his Prime Ministers, Michel Debré, put it, de Gaulle will remain the greatest French statesman of the modern age and arguably one of the three great statesmen of the twentieth century, along with Churchill and Roosevelt...most notably "for having turned that most crushing of French defeats into a manner of victory," as Pierre Nora has written.[3]

The two volumes contain some arresting vignettes on the principal figures around de Gaulle. Leading the negative hit parade is Jacques Soustelle, the brilliant anthropologist and specialist on Aztec Mexico. Soustelle, secretary-general of the Gaullist movement, is faulted by a number of witnesses as humorless and, most tellingly, as not having been a combatant in the Resistance. The most favorable notices, perhaps surprisingly, seem to go to André Malraux--the brilliant intellectual, culturalist, and inveterate affabulator, but also hard-working and kindly to subordinates...and in ways that are not fully explained, a sort of antithesis to Soustelle (who later broke with de Gaulle over Algeria). Malraux seems to have been the only one who could go toe-to-toe verbally with de Gaulle.

Malraux's wartime trajectory was typical of many Frenchmen who, understandably in 1940, could see nothing ahead but German domination of Europe. They adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Malraux spent his time on the Riviera in this period of *attentisme*, until in 1944 he became a resistant and, with typical aplomb, formed the Alsace-Lorraine division and fought at the close of the war against the Germans. Others, notably François Mitterrand, passed by a position with Vichy enroute to later becoming a resistance fighter. Olivier Guichard did not have a passage via Vichy (he was only twenty in 1940)...and yet his family (ennobled under Napoleon) did: his father, a naval officer, was director of the civilian cabinet of Admiral Darlan. As late as 1944, Maurice Couve de Murville was a Vichy diplomatic official, and yet de Gaulle brought him into his movement, thus indicating the General's "weakness for parchment" (degrees), in other words his favoring of educated French elites.

The serial careers in Vichy and the Free French movement are illustrative of the power of the French Government apparatus in spite of the vicissitudes of changing regimes. That, together with the attraction of Philippe Pétain as a father-figure and savior ("a very great man who died around 1925," as de Gaulle once described him[4]), made de Gaulle's role as a rebel (Jean Lacouture's term) against the armistice of June 1940 all the more difficult.

Yet it is surprising, as revealed in these volumes, how many people were dismayed by Pétain's speech of June 1940 calling for surrender and, by the same token, how many people found their way out of France (or escaped from captivity) and joined the de Gaulle movement--belying, somewhat, the conventional notion that the movement at the outset consisted only of a few mavericks, a few Jews and a few Breton fishermen. At the end of the war, of course, there were many more, some of whom were in the internal resistance, and they had to be accommodated in terms of careers in the postwar. Membership in the resistance became a powerful card for someone seeking a Cabinet position.

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And although he was a decade too late in returning to power, de Gaulle had the inestimable virtue of turning unchecked parliamentary rule, which had made France the laughingstock of the Western world, into a government with a strong executive--what an admiring François Mauriac termed a *Republique consulaire*.<sup>[5]</sup>

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## NOTES

[1] Seminar of the late Prof. Furet at the Fondation Saint-Simon, Paris, January 24, 1989.

[2] Charles de Gaulle, *The Edge of the Sword*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1960), p. 45.

[3] Pierre Nora, "Gaullists and Communists" in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Pierre Nora, ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), Edition Quarto, Vol. 2, p. 2504.

[4] Charles de Gaulle, *Lettres, Notes et Carnets*, Vol. 4 (Paris: Plon, 1982), p. 87.

[5] François Mauriac, *Bloc-notes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), présentation by Jean Touzot, Tome IV, 1965-1967, p. 195. N.D.L.R. Mauriac drew a contrast between the strong government of de Gaulle ("République consulaire") and the "Gouvernements d'assemblée" of the previous Fourth Republic, in which the National Assembly held a certain power over the Executive, which it could vote out of office when it pleased.

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