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## CHARLES DE GAULLE

### Synopsis

Charles André Joseph Marie de Gaulle was born on November 23, 1890, in the northern industrial city of Lille, France. His father, Henri, was a teacher of philosophy and mathematics and a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), in which Prussia (today known as Germany) humiliatingly defeated the French. This loss colored the life of de Gaulle's father, a patriot who vowed he would live to avenge the defeat and win back the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. His attitude deeply influenced the lives of his sons, whom he groomed to aid in France's restoration to the greatest European power.

From his earliest years, both his father and mother immersed de Gaulle in French history. For many centuries de Gaulle's ancestors had played a role in French history, almost always as patriots defending France from invaders. In the fourteenth century, a Chevalier de Gaulle defeated an invading English army in defense of the city of Vire. Jean de Gaulle is cited in the Battle of Agincourt (1415).

Perhaps the major influence on de Gaulle's formation came from his uncle, also named Charles de Gaulle, who wrote a book about the Celts, the ancient people of western Europe. The book called for union of the Breton, Scots, Irish, and Welsh peoples. The young de Gaulle wrote in his copybook a sentence from his uncle's book, which proved to be a prediction of his future life: "In a camp, surprised by enemy attack under cover of night, where each man is fighting alone, in dark confusion, no one asks for the grade or rank of the man who lifts up the standard and makes the first call to rally for resistance."

Charles de Gaulle rose from French soldier in World War I to exiled leader and, eventually, president of the Fifth Republic, a position he held until 1969. De Gaulle's time as a commander in World War II would later influence his political career, providing him with a tenacious drive. His time as president was marked by the student and worker uprisings in 1968, which he responded to with an appeal for civil order.

Early Military Career

### Military career

De Gaulle's career as defender of France began in the summer of 1909, when he was admitted to the elite military academy of Saint-Cyr. Among his classmates was the future marshal of France, Alphonse Juin (1888–1967), who later recalled de Gaulle's nicknames in school—"The Grand Constable" and "The Big Asparagus" (because of his height).

After graduation, in October 1912, Second Lieutenant de Gaulle reported to Henri Philippe Pétain, who first became his idol and later his most hated enemy. (In World War I [1914–18] Pétain was the hero of Verdun. During World War II [1941–45] he surrendered to German leader Adolf Hitler [1889–1945] and collaborated with the Germans while de Gaulle was leading the French forces of liberation.)

De Gaulle led a frontline company as captain in World War I and was cited three times for valor, or courage. Severely wounded, he was left for dead on the battlefield of Verdun and was later imprisoned by the Germans when he revived in a graveyard cart. After he had escaped and been recaptured several times, the Germans put him in a maximum security prison-fortress.

## **Between wars**

After the war de Gaulle went to general-staff school, where he damaged his career by constantly criticizing his superiors. He criticized the concept of trench warfare and wrote a series of essays calling for a strategy of movement with armored tanks and planes. His superiors ignored his works. The Germans, however, did read him and adapted his theories to develop their triumphant strategy of blitzkrieg, or lightning war, with which they defeated the French in 1940.

When France fell, de Gaulle, then an unknown brigadier general (a military officer above a colonel), refused to surrender. He fled to London, convinced that the British would never surrender and that American power, once committed, would win the war. On June 18, 1940, on British Broadcasting Company (BBC), he insisted that France had only lost a battle, not the war, and called upon patriotic Frenchmen to resist the Germans. This inspiring broadcast won him worldwide honor.

## **Early political activity**

When the Germans were driven back at Normandy in 1944, de Gaulle had no rivals for leadership in France. Therefore, in the fall of that year, all of the members of the French Parliament agreed in their vote and elected him premier. De Gaulle had fiercely opposed the German enemy, and now he vigorously defended France against the influence of his powerful allies Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) of Russia, Winston Churchill (1874–1965) of Great Britain, and Franklin Roosevelt (1882–1945) of the United States. De Gaulle once stated that he never feared Hitler, who he knew was doomed to defeat. He did, however, fear that his allies would dominate France and Europe in the postwar period.

By the fall of 1945, only a year after assuming power, de Gaulle was at odds with all of the political leaders of France. He saw himself as the unique savior of France, the only champion of French honor, grandeur, and independence. He despised all politicians as corrupt and only out for their self-interests. The politicians then banded against him. In January 1946, disgusted by politics, he resigned and retreated into a silence to ponder the future of France.

In 1947 de Gaulle reemerged as leader of the opposition. He headed what he termed "The Rally of the French People," which he insisted was not a political party but a national movement. The Rally became the largest single political force in France but never achieved majority status. Although de Gaulle continued to disagree with the political system, he refused to lead a coup d'etat, or a sudden overthrow of the government. He retired again in 1955.

Read more:

<http://www.notablebiographies.com/De-Du/de-Gaulle-Charles.html#ixzz3rvfaUkLfWorld War II>

At the time fighting broke out between Germany and France, de Gaulle was leading a tank brigade. He was temporarily appointed the brigadier general of the 4th Armored Division in May of 1940. Continuing to rise up professionally, de Gaulle became the undersecretary for defense and war for French leader Paul Reynaud that June. A short while later, Reynaud was replaced by Pétain. Pétain's new government, sometimes called the Vichy government, worked out a deal with Germany to avoid further bloodshed. The Vichy regime became infamous for collaborating with the Nazis.

A dedicated patriot, de Gaulle did not accept France's surrender to Germany in 1940. He instead fled to England, where he became a leader of the Free French movement, with the support of British prime minister Winston Churchill. From London, de Gaulle broadcast a message across the English Channel to his countrymen, calling for them to resist the German occupation. He also organized soldiers from French colonies to fight alongside the allied troops.

De Gaulle sometimes irritated other allied leaders with his demands and perceived arrogance. American President Franklin D. Roosevelt reportedly could not stand him. In fact, at the war's end, de

Gaule was purposely left out of the Yalta Conference, as Germany negotiated its surrender. He did, however, secure his nation an occupation zone in Germany and a seat on the United Nation's Security Council. De Gaulle enjoyed wide support at home and, in 1945, became president of France's provisional government. In a dispute over greater power for the country's executive branch, de Gaulle resigned this post.

For several years, de Gaulle led his own political movement, "Rally for the French People," which did not gain much momentum. He retired from politics in 1953.

### **President of the Fifth Republic**

The French government, known as the Fourth Republic, began to crumble in the late 1950s, and de Gaulle once again returned to public service to help his country. He helped form the country's next government, becoming its president in January 1959. Establishing France's Fifth Republic, de Gaulle dedicated himself to improving the country's economic situation and maintaining its independence. He sought to keep France separate from the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union. To show France's military relevance, de Gaulle successfully campaigned for the country to press on with its nuclear weapons program.

De Gaulle was not afraid to make controversial decisions. After coping with uprisings in Algeria for years, he helped the French colony achieve independence in 1962. This move was not widely popular at the time. De Gaulle supported the idea of a united Europe, but he wanted Europe to be free from the superpowers' influences. He fought to keep Britain out of the European Economic Community because of its close ties to the United States. In 1966, de Gaulle also pulled his country's forces out of the North American Treaty Organization, acting again on his concerns with the United States. To some, de Gaulle came off as anti-American. Though he may have been, to some extent, his actions seemed to truly reflected his deep nationalistic views.

Sometimes inflexible and intractable, de Gaulle nearly saw his government toppled by student and worker protests in 1968. He managed to restore order to the country, but left power soon after, following a battle over political and economic reforms. In April 1969, de Gaulle resigned from the presidency.

### **Death and Legacy**

After his resignation, de Gaulle retired to his home in Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises. He had little time to enjoy the quiet life of this village, as he died of a heart attack on November 9, 1970. French President George Pompidou, who had worked closely with de Gaulle before succeeding him, delivered the terrible news to the public, saying "General de Gaulle is dead. France is a widow." France mourned the loss of its famous statesman and military leader; the country had lost one of its greatest heroes—a hero who had seen his people through war, and proved to be instrumental in his country's recovery.

Other world leaders offered up words of praise for de Gaulle. Queen Elizabeth II said that his "courage and tenacity in the allied cause during the dark years of the Second World War will never be forgotten." Two American presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson and Harry S. Truman, also sent their condolences to the people of France. President Richard Nixon was among the foreign dignitaries who attended a special service for de Gaulle, held shortly after his death, at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.