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The General: Charles De Gaulle And The France He Saved

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THE GENERAL CHARLES DE GAULLE AND THE FRANCE HE SAVED

JONATHAN FENBY



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 œcarrying France on [his] shoulders.â •Â 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 Hitlerâ™s 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.Â Le GÃ©nÃ©ral, 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.

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the best biographies I have ever owned and read. Jonathan Fenby has a well-deserved reputation for excellence but his latest work is superbly-researched - of course, there is a great deal of material on his subject out there, but there is much that is original here - and beautifully and perfectly written. All of that makes the book a pleasure to read, but it is also splendidly presented with General de Gaulle's kepi in the centre of the front cover. The whole effect is arresting and the contents - 636 pages of elegant prose as well as a bibliography and index and, most usefully, a list of 'significant people,' those heroes and rogues who played prominent parts in the life of France's saviour and President - a pleasure to devour. Whilst reading - and it took me much longer than 'three sittings' as I wanted to savour the pleasure - I found myself remembering much that I had forgotten from my own earlier years. I was born in 1938. Consequently, I cannot recall General de Gaulle's coming to England following the French capitulation in 1940. Nor can I remember his historic broadcasts from London and the early years of his leadership of the Free French. However, the liberation of Paris and the General's march down the Champs-Élysées in 1944 made an impression on a six-year-old. De Gaulle's premiership following the war didn't make as much of an impression but I was really taking an interest in 'affairs' by the time that the 'Algérie Française' crisis erupted and I recall admiring enthusiastically the leaders of the 'Pieds-Noirs,' the French people who wished for Algeria to remain part of the French Empire. My heroes at the time were General Jacques Massu and Monsieur Jacques Soustelle, both long-time allies and friends of De Gaulle.

The Capacity to Govern: A Report to the Club of Rome This book is more than an interesting biography of one of the most important rulers of the 20th century. It raises profound questions concerning the importance of rulers and their dangers, and on democratic capacities to govern as a whole. Let me mention only four of the important insights into historic processes provided by the case of De Gaulle, as derived from this book though not discussed by it: 1. Historic processes include a lot of random effects. But for a series of historic accidents De Gaulle would not have become one of the two most important rulers of France together with Napoleon Bonaparte. 2. The reconstruction of French governance with the introduction of a presidential regime is an outstanding illustration of "crises as opportunities," with creation based on destruction. 3. Individuals, including outstanding rulers, can have profound effects on history. But exaggeration should be avoided. De Gaulle did not "save" France. Without him France would have been in much worse a situation for quite some time, but it would not have disappeared from history and surely would have

recuperated.⁴ Even the best of rulers suffer from pathologies of power, including not knowing when to exit and not helping with transition to their heirs. But some pathologies can in special cases be useful, such as exaggerated self-confidence which sometimes makes the nearly impossible possible.

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