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Sudhir Hazareesingh, *In the Shadow of the General. Modern France and the Myth of de Gaulle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xiv + 238 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb); £18.99 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-530888-4.

Review by Andrew Knapp, University of Reading, United Kingdom.

“The best book on de Gaulle,” says *Le Magazine des Livres* (according to the book’s back flyleaf), largely missing the point. If this were a book about de Gaulle, written by an author as distinguished as Dr. Hazareesingh, it would surely show us the dark side: the dubious circumstances of the return to power in 1958; the large-scale slaughter of the Challe Plan, aimed at destroying the Algerian independence movement militarily before opening peace negotiations; the shameful treatment of the *harkis*, the Algerians who fought on the French side in Algeria; the massacre of Algerians demonstrating in Paris in October 1961; the neo-colonial legacy of *la Françafrique*. It might question the judgement of a man who thought he could regain for France the position she had lost at Waterloo [1], who imagined he could detach western Europe from American influence in the middle of the Cold War, and who considered using live rounds against students in May 1968.[2] Such material, if not quite absent, is marginal to this book. If you want it, go to Éric Roussel, or possibly to Serge Berstein.[3] By contrast, Hazareesingh can sound a trifle breathless in his admiration of “a leader perfectly holding (well, almost perfectly) the balance between his personal humility and the grandeur of his task” (p. 182), and “majestically occupying his position as France’s most respected historic figure” (p. 172).

But if awkwardness is glossed over in the book, it is because it is glossed over in the de Gaulle myth, which is the real subject of this study: the intense, passionate relationship between the French people and the General during and especially after his lifetime. This is the most recent output in Hazareesingh’s masterly examination of French political ideas and beliefs that has so far spanned two decades.[4] It has already been published in French.[5]

Myth, says Barthes, is not invention, or denial. Rather, it “transforms history into nature”; it “does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.”[6] The myth of de Gaulle, then, is not the messy, historically-contingent business that any historian who tries to grapple with the man’s life will encounter; not merely an account of the General’s thirty-year passage through the French political firmament. It is an epic to stand for all times, with much that is inconvenient ignored or gently airbrushed out of the picture.

Hazareesingh is quite clear about how much the myth owed to “the deliberate creation, by the General himself, of a specifically Gaullian mystique, a mixture of the symbolic and the discursive as powerful as it was subtle” (p. 35). Thus “The Gaullian legend was built over time from immense blocks of granite...: the titanic combat of the Resistance, the epic narrative of the *Memoirs*, the solemn political rites of the postwar years, and the first years of the Fifth Republic” (p. 94). If the wartime broadcasts were the opening act, the tours of France in the months following the liberation of Paris in August 1944 served to “seal the mystical union between his person and the French people,” and in doing so to re-establish a

French State (p. 28). The careful handling of a series of ceremonies during his leadership of the Provisional Government—from the return to Paris and the walk down the Champs-Élysées on August 25–26 1944, through the celebrations of Armistice Day with Churchill on 11 November 1944, to VE-Day and the 14 July and another Armistice Day in 1945—established an image of a Republic of national unity, fraternity, and order, with himself in the pivotal position; the near-opposite of the rival Communist conception of the period.

After his resignation on 20 January 1946, it was the writing of the *War Memoirs* (rather than the *Rassemblement du Peuple Français* and its failed attempt to bring down the Fourth Republic) which fixed de Gaulle's role through war and liberation in the public consciousness. The memoirs “offered a comprehensive vision of recent French history centered around the General's three roles as war leader”—as the only true expression of the national will, exemplified in the *Appel du 18 juin*; as the pivot of the internal and external Resistance; and as the “unyielding defender of the national interest against British and American allies who sought to ‘vassalize’ France” (p. 40). The return to power in 1958 saw three further layers added to the manufacture of myth. One was the ceaseless visits to every *département* of France, the punishing schedules of engagements, and the walkabouts that were the nightmare of his bodyguards: a crucial form of contact with the population that amounted to a “permanent plebiscite” (pp. 67, 101–103). Another was the annual visit, on 18 June, to Mont Valérien, the site outside Paris used by the Germans to shoot Resistance fighters (the fact that most of those executed there were Communists was conveniently overlooked) (p. 90). Finally, La Boisserie, de Gaulle's house at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, appeared—notably in the illustrated press—as the place where the General gathered the spiritual resources necessary for his mission.

Despite the importance of artifice, however, Hazareesingh emphatically rejects “the classic explanation of political myth as the product of propaganda,” pointing out that the Gaullian legend “never held such fascination for the collective consciousness as it does today, when Gaullism is utterly finished as a political force” (p. 176). The French have had their own reasons, both material and symbolic, for being grateful to de Gaulle and revering his memory. The Free French epic above all, but also the laying to rest of France's decades-long constitutional conflict: de Gaulle, “royalist at heart but republican by reason” (p. 49), achieved a “synthesis” (p. 21) of the two traditions that, in its broad outline at least, ended up satisfying even the General's fiercest opponents, such as François Mitterrand. With some exaggeration, Hazareesingh goes on to argue that de Gaulle “put an end to two civil wars” in 1944 and 1962 (p. 179). While the Allies surely helped in the former, and the latter was achieved at a terrible price and only after four years, the outcome in both cases identified the General with the restoration of peace and of public order.

Two other elements have stamped the Gaullian myth. One is de Gaulle's “moral exemplarity”, the combination already noted above of personal humility and awareness of the historic dimension of his mission (p. 147). To associate the term “humility” with such a man may surprise. But even Gaullist celebrations, at least during his lifetime, were marked by brevity and restraint. And Hazareesingh emphasizes de Gaulle's (relative) willingness to share his glory with others (in the Gaullist canon, for example, the role of military genius goes to General Leclerc, not to de Gaulle himself), and above all his rigorous separation of his personal expenses from those of the State (de Gaulle famously paid for his own postage stamps and his personal dinner guests at the Élysée). In an era when political corruption, real or supposed, is rarely out of the press, such characteristics inspire a certain nostalgia, akin to that of imperial Romans for the austere virtues of the early Republic. De Gaulle's myth, finally, had a quasi-religious aspect: Malraux compared him to the “great religious solitaires,” adding that he “had something of the wizard about him” (p. 51).

This spiritual dimension, for Hazareesingh, is one of the defining features of the de Gaulle myth, and appears again and again in the correspondence addressed by ordinary French citizens to the General. As president, de Gaulle received over 100,000 letters a year: the results of his dips into this correspondence

are perhaps the most original feature of Hazareesingh's sources. Their most common characteristic is a desire to "share intimacy" with de Gaulle—surely the equivalent to touching a king's hand or his cloak. But Hazareesingh also discerns in them a trajectory characteristic of the construction of political myths, from protest and rejection (for not all the letters were friendly, especially during the Algerian war) to remorse and guilt, notably after his resignation, and finally to canonisation as a transcendent, and benevolent, father figure.

De Gaulle's refusal to be categorized as right- or left-wing, though barely credible in his lifetime, gained currency after his death, as even the Left recognised his virtues, grudgingly and then with growing enthusiasm. In one French commune in ten (out of a total of 36,000), a street or a square now bears de Gaulle's name; not a few of these baptisms were initiated by Communist mayors. Although the official commemorations reached a peak in the "de Gaulle year" of 1990, a century after his birth, a half-century after the *Appel du 18 juin*, and twenty years after his death, the myth continues to bed down in an ever-growing literature and in the development and extension of commemorative sites, especially Colombey. If he has never quite achieved the international status of a Gandhi or a Mandela, he has been revered in surprising places. Hazareesingh cites a flag flown at half-mast when the news of his death reached a primary school in Venezuela, or guerrillas in a remote area of India breaking cover and chanting "de Gaulle-Phnomh Penh!" in reference to his anti-colonialist speech of 1966, when they realised they were in the presence of a French journalist. Yasser Arafat wore a Cross of Lorraine on his fatigues.

Is Hazareesingh himself a little in thrall to the Gaullian myth? More, surely, could have been made of its dysfunctional aspects. True, he mentions de Gaulle's clear admiration for Napoleon, while reaffirming that, unlike Bonapartism, Gaullism is "much more than an expression of authoritarian, antidemocratic populism" (pp. 54-57). He observes that women barely feature in the Gaullist Gotha (of 1,038 individual *Compagnons de la Liberation*, 1,032 were men), that Gaullists tended to demonize their critics, and that Gaullism contributed to the besetting over-centralization of the French state. But Hazareesingh tends to minimize the backlash provoked by the marginalization of Vichy in the Gaullist account of France's "dark years"; and the question of how helpful the Gaullian myth has been in equipping France to confront the rigours of globalization, though treated critically by more than one French author, is largely ignored.[7]

These reservations aside, Hazareesingh has given us an indispensable book about an essential dimension of contemporary French political culture. Like a Gaullist celebration, it is brief; but it is dense enough and rich enough to repay more than one reading.

## NOTES

[1] Alain Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions de Fallois/Fayard, 1994), p. 159.

[2] Pierre Lefranc, *Avec de Gaulle: 25 ans avec le général de Gaulle* (Paris: Plon, 1989; 1st edition: *Avec qui vous savez* [Paris, Plon, 1979]), pp. 336-337; Alain Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, vol. 3 (Paris: Édition de Fallois/Fayard, 2000), p. 481.

[3] Éric Roussel, *De Gaulle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002); Serge Berstein, *Histoire du Gaullisme* (Paris: Perrin, 2002).

[4] See, for example, Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectuals and the French Communist Party: Disillusion and Decline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic: Five Studies in Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Hazareesingh,

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*The Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta, 2004); Hazareesingh, *The Saint-Napoleon: Celebrations of Sovereignty in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[5] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Le Mythe gaullien* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

[6] “Le mythe transforme l’histoire en nature,” Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), p. 215. “Le mythe ne nie pas les choses, sa fonction et au contraire d’en parler ; simplement, il les unifie, les innocente, les fonde en nature et en éternité, il leur donne une clarté qui n’est pas celle de l’explication, mais celle du constat,” Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 230. The translation comes from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), pp. 129, 143.

[7] See also Nicolas Tenzer, *La face cachée du gaullisme* (Paris: Hachette, 1998); Antoine Cassan, *Vivement hier: tous ringardo-gaullistes* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1996).

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