

BOOK REVIEW

Le Fil de l'épée

Charles de Gaulle's masterpiece on leadership—and himself

by Nicholas Dungan

In the concise canon of genuinely ingenious books on leadership—of which Machiavelli's *The Prince* is perhaps the most celebrated and the most cited—Charles de Gaulle's *Le Fil de l'épée* [*The Edge of the Sword*¹] can rightly claim pride of place. The work has often been described as the handbook on leadership which the younger scholar-soldier Charles wrote for the later politician-statesman de Gaulle. (The General was wont, like Julius Cæsar in *The Gallic War*, to refer to himself in the third person).

De Gaulle is to France as Churchill is to Britain

In the English-speaking world, the personage Charles de Gaulle was widely misconstrued in his time as a gratuitously irascible character embodying all the tetchiness and pretentiousness that those who do not know French society from the inside so often associate with the personality of French people. Happily, more than one recent biography in English has served to rectify that misconception. In France, on the other hand, the towering figure of de Gaulle has become as unjustifiably idealised, and as unjustly vilified, as Winston Churchill in America or Britain.

The relationship between the two, during the Second World War, was characterised by intense admiration and incandescent irritation, leading Churchill, according to legend, to quip: 'the heaviest cross I have to bear is the Cross of Lorraine', which was the symbol of the Free French led by de Gaulle. But for all their similarity as acolytes of History and each one's conviction that he would become—as each one clearly did become—a man of destiny and thereafter a man of letters, they were nonetheless products of different personal backgrounds and professional vocations.

Charles becomes de Gaulle

Charles de Gaulle was born in 1890 in Lille to a traditional Roman Catholic family. His father was a professor of history and literature. De Gaulle was educated in Paris and then admitted to the St Cyr military academy in 1909. He served in the First World War, much of his time as a German prisoner of war despite five escape attempts, and thereafter held command positions in the 1920s in Poland, in the French-occupied Rhineland and later in France's League of Nations mandate of Lebanon and Syria.

¹ The book was translated into English by the translator and novelist Gerard Hopkins, nephew of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and was published as *The Edge of the Sword* in 1960. It was reviewed in the *New York Times* by Sir Denis Brogan. Contemporary readers will, however, find the translation largely unavailable and would best read the tempus edition in French, published by Perrin with a thorough foreword by Hervé Gaymard.

De Gaulle goes on stage at the École de Guerre

From the mid-1920s onwards de Gaulle became a protégé of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the ‘Lion of Verdun’ and victor of the Great War (who, later, in his dotage and to his shame, would be the chief of state of Vichy France under Nazi domination). In April 1927, Captain de Gaulle, introduced by Pétain in person and himself clad in full uniform including sabre, delivered three set-piece lectures to senior officers at the École de Guerre staff college in Paris. These three lectures—‘The Conduct of War’, ‘Of Character’ and ‘Of Prestige’—were to constitute the core of *Le Fil de l'épée*. Five years later, in 1932, the book was published with the addition of a revised version of a previous article which became the fourth chapter, ‘Of Doctrine’, as well as a new, fifth and final, chapter, ‘Of Politics and the Soldier’.

Throughout the work, de Gaulle repudiates the melancholia of the then-beleaguered French army and issues a clarion call to return to its glory days of yore. In a stance both philosophical but also highly practical in military terms, he stresses, especially in ‘The Conduct of War’ and ‘Of Doctrine’, the necessity to shape military strategy and tactics based on circumstances and reality, not theory or dogma; he cites [Henri Bergson](#) on the need ‘to achieve direct contact with reality’ and to train one’s mind to ‘acquire intuition by combining instinct with intelligence’. In this, de Gaulle is in uncanny parallel with [Sir Isaiah Berlin’s](#) later—and otherwise unrelated—essays, ‘The Sense of Reality’ and ‘Political Judgement’. (See CogitoPraxis book review of Berlin’s *The Sense of Reality*.)

Portrait of a leader

Above all, however, the significance of *Le Fil de l'épée* lies in its lessons on leadership, chiefly contained in ‘Of Character’ and ‘Of Prestige’. Indeed, today, we would translate de Gaulle’s *prestige* in French as ‘leadership’ in English.

In ‘Of Character’ after a lament at the loss of will of the French armed forces throughout much of the 19th century, de Gaulle describes the ‘Man of Character’ who will reverse this ill fortune. In still more uplifting and near-poetic prose in ‘Of Prestige’, de Gaulle identifies and elaborates upon the ingredients of successful leadership: natural aptitude, innate talent, giftedness honed by practice, mystery, reserve both in gesture and word, the power of silence, a capacity for decision-making, ardour and, again, character. De Gaulle sums up the ‘conditions of leadership’ as ‘*réserve, caractère, grandeur*’ which in today’s English we would render as self-possession, character and vision.

Le Fil de l'épée contains profound, powerful, permanent wisdom through its incomparable insights into the shaping of oneself in preparation for great events and great achievements; the development of character through the disciplined acquisition of courage and skill; and the adoption of a long-term, big-picture, history-making ambition. Twice in his subsequent career, at the fall of France in 1940 and at the brink of insurrection in 1958, Charles de Gaulle saved his beloved motherland by applying the lessons he himself had taught in *Le Fil de l'épée*.