

## Book Review

*In the Shadow of the General: Modern France and the Myth of de Gaulle.* By Sudhir Hazareesingh. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2012. xiv + 238 pp. £18.99. ISBN: 978 0 19 530888 4.

What more can be said about de Gaulle? France's most famous twentieth-century political figure has a bibliography so vast that one is entitled to wonder whether it is even possible to write about the man without embarking on a multi-volume door-stopper. From memoirs and panegyrics, to angry pamphlets and posthumous deconstruction, any writing about the General relies on an excess of language. Even some of France's most self-regarding contemporary intellectuals—such as Régis Debray—get overwhelmed by the great man; he seems to provoke unexpected humility in all but his most hardened critics.

With such a weight of heritage, not the least of Sudhir Hazareesingh's achievements is having written about de Gaulle in less than 200 pages. This has numerous advantages. For a start, it ensures that this deeply impressive book will be read by many—including students unwilling to lug heavy biographies around their university campuses. It also makes de Gaulle more approachable. Indeed, the pithy prose seems to begin preemptively the process of demystification that is the subject of the book. For this is not, strictly speaking, a book *about* de Gaulle. It is a study of political myth with the General as its privileged case study. Over the course of seven chapters, Hazareesingh shows postwar France ultimately unable to escape the shadow of its greatest leader. In the 1940s, it was de Gaulle's charisma that triumphed, but by the 1960s the French were increasingly absorbed into a Gaullian vision of history as well. His death in 1970 merely confirmed this trend. Former naysayers on the left have been drawn into the General's orbit, while the right has fought over the scraps from his table. The French, it would seem, continue to confirm de Gaulle's prophetic belief that he could embody all of France in his person. As Hazareesingh makes clear, the *mythe gaullien* has gradually become unmoored from its context and has turned into a trans-historical repository for French hopes and fears about politics.

Stated so starkly, this argument is striking. Of course, the voluminous literature on de Gaulle has dealt with all of these themes before but this book is by far the most coherent and accessible discussion of his mythologisation. Moreover, it provides a useful starting point for a discussion of postwar French political culture. For instance, Hazareesingh has made extensive use of public letters to de Gaulle, which give us an intimate portrait of French political language in all its different registers. The General was, by turns, made into a saint, a military man, a father or simply the secular embodiment of the Nation. Even those *pièdes-noirs*, Pétainists and Communists who detested him resorted to the kind of verbal foot-stamping more appropriate to a teenage rebellion than reasoned political discussion. Elsewhere, Hazareesingh makes a number of crucial points about de Gaulle's ability to absorb and refashion all of France's political traditions. A combination of ecumenical symbolism, personal restraint and, it should

be said, fortuitous context allowed him to express the finest traits of republican rationality, nationalist glory and left-wing engagement. The re-appropriation of his memory by all sides of the political spectrum since his death only reinforced this plasticity as the 'real' de Gaulle was replaced in national memory by a multi-faceted myth.

Inevitably, there are limits to an approach that rests solely on the sustained analysis of a myth. One concern is that de Gaulle's status as a man of the Right is somewhat elided. He could have been more clearly situated in a right-wing tradition of order, hierarchy and grandeur, and one would have wanted a more in-depth exploration of his impact on his political family after 1970. Hazareesingh shows how politicians of the Gaullist right struggled with the General's legacy but then what explains the right's repeated electoral successes under the Fifth Republic? Is it simply an intense—and thwarted – desire on the part of the French to resurrect de Gaulle? Or is it because, on the contrary, the French right has largely succeeded in updating the Gaullian myth? Given the embarrassing paucity of work on the centre-right under the Fifth Republic, this would have been an excellent opportunity to open new avenues of inquiry. Nevertheless, it would be churlish to demand more from a book that already packs so many insights into so few pages. Even those familiar with de Gaulle will find much to admire and this is likely to become a reference work for many years to come. In part, this is due to the exhaustive research and the clear presentation (although the fact that the book was originally written in French is sometimes apparent in the translation). Most of all, however, it is because this book succeeds handsomely in elevating de Gaulle from man to meta-narrative without ever succumbing to the worst excesses of the *mythe gaullien*.

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