

De Gaulle and Algeria

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The policy on Algeria was one of the most marking elements of leadership of France's president Charles De Gaulle (1958-1969). After accessing to power in May 1958, in the midst of a major crisis in French politics over the destiny of France's relationship with its most important (annexed) colony, Algeria, De Gaulle stimulated contradictory passions and, most importantly, mystery, as to where he stood on the Algerian question. His three main constituencies, the French in France who were divided on the issue, the French in Algeria—known as Pieds-Noirs (black feet)—who wanted Algeria to remain part of France, and the Algerians who were fighting for independence. The ambiguity that reigned on his policy for Algeria was lifted in what became a historic televised speech given on September 16, 1959. In it, he uttered the word “self-determination” which was much feared by the French in Algeria. That speech created stupor in the ranks of the pro-French Algeria who called him a traitor, and marked a decisive swing in France's colonial policy. As a subject of numerous studies and publications, De Gaulle has remained a mystery and the object of both despise and passion. That is, at least, what transpires from the newest book* of the French historian, Benjamin Stora, who was born in Constantine, Algeria, and left for France with his parent during the mass exodus of European settlers in 1962, after Algeria gained its independence.

One of the driving questions that led Stora to write this book was: why did President Charles De Gaulle, who symbolized national unity, was not able to generate a national consensus on the Algerian question? The author wanted to find an adequate explanation to this paradox that still permeates today any discussion on the former president of France. To undertake this task, Stora examines three possibilities: 1) Did De Gaulle use what his adversaries on the right called “duplicity” because he deceived his fellow Frenchmen by not telling them his true intentions? 2) Was he a great “decolonizer,” as the left referred to him, and a man who was concerned by the welfare of his fellow human beings in the less developed world? And, 3) Did he deserve the reputation of being a political animal?

Stora answers these questions by saying that De Gaulle did not engage in a game of deceit or double-talk, as he was accused, and asserts that, from the start, De Gaulle expressed the need to end the status quo on colonial Algeria. This desire was relayed by many of the General's confidants and close associates. The book is replete with statements to this effects that were found in various personal accounts, interviews and publications. The author avers also that De Gaulle was not overly concerned with the plight of his fellow men in the less developed world. His main concern was always the interests of his country, France, which he saw as being held back by the Algerian crisis. Finally, Stora states and shows with minutiae in his book that De Gaulle was a political animal, a realist, and a master of political strategy who sought the disengagement of France from its colonies and its repositioning in Europe independently from the East-West rivalries of the Cold War. For Stora, it is hard to believe, as De Gaulle's critics have said, that the General had sold out on Algeria or that he had accidentally lost Algeria, or that the evolution toward Algeria's independence was already pre-determined by historical forces he did not control. (p. 185)

Throughout the book the reader can easily follow the author as he tries to find the key factor behind De Gaulle's policy on Algeria. After discarding the theory that De Gaulle's conception of Algeria's future was developed well before he was called upon to lead the country in 1958, Stora suggests that there must be one triggering event or thought behind the General's policy, which he ultimately finds in a speech delivered on September 16, 1959. In that speech, the General offered three possible solutions to the Algerian crisis: a) secession, which would entail dividing the country; b) turning Algeria into a totally French territory through the elevation of the Algerians to the level of citizens; and c) independence with some form of association with France. In the speech—reproduced in the appendix of the book (p. 235)—De Gaulle seemed to lean more toward the latter solution, but he conditioned it on the “pacification” of the country first, i.e., the end of the independence war which the Algerians had started on November 1, 1954 under a unified leadership, that of the National Liberation Front.

In the 1959 speech, De Gaulle declared: “If those who lead [the insurrection] demand for the Algerians the right to self-determination, well, all possibilities are open. If the rebels fear that by ending their [armed] struggle they will be handed over to justice, then they have to discuss with the authorities the conditions of their free return, just as I suggested when I offered the peace of the brave.” (p. 241). On September 28, 1959, the Algerian temporary government (GPRA, in exile) replied to De Gaulle's speech by rejecting the unilateral end of the hostilities and suggesting direct negotiations with the French government for a ceasefire and for the conditions and guarantees of the exercise of the right to self-determination (the full text is also in the appendix, p. 247). In May 1961, the two protagonists finally had their first negotiation sessions, which were to lead to the historic Evian Accords of March 18, 1962 on the independence process and its aftermath.

Throughout this book, which is easy to read, hard to put down, yet full of dizzying accounts and counter-accounts on who said what to whom, Benjamin Stora defends in many ways his key thesis: “The September 16, 1959 speech is the most important political event of the Algerian conflict.” (p. 183) He even qualifies it as a “paradigm shift” since, according to him, it was the first utterance of the “self-determination” option and it was going to lead the developments that followed all the way to Algeria's independence in 1962. As to why De Gaulle did this, Stora maintains, in the last sentence of his book, that it was because he wanted France out of the colonial imbroglio in order to protect its interests and influence in the world.

Some other historians may agree with Benjamin Stora's “rediscovery” of the 1959 speech and its use as a central element in the elucidation of the “Mystery De Gaulle.” However, others would not agree. For one thing, the 1959 speech was referred to a long time ago by many other academics and former participants in the conflict, in published works and interviews. However, no one had placed it at the center of an entire book like Stora did in “The Mystery De Gaulle.” Furthermore, many people may also not agree with Stora's statement that the speech was the most important political event of the entire conflict. Algerian nationalists and many observers may opt for the first gun shots of Algeria's war of independence on November 1, 1954 as the most important event, because it was the start of a seven and a half year conflict that was not only bloody and traumatizing for the Algerians (one million and half of them were killed in it), but also highly destabilizing for France. That first gunshot on All Saints Day threw off balance the French colonial enterprise in Algeria just like Dien Bien Phu did the same year in Vietnam. In fact, it could very well be that these two events, combined with France's search for a secure and respectable position in the European and transatlantic worlds during the Cold War era triggered the urgency in De Gaulle's mind to find a workable solution to the Algerian conflict. The September 1959 speech was a consequence of this thinking and not its start. De Gaulle may have had other intentions when he assumed the presidency of the Fifth Republic, but the events

that ensued may have directed him toward this “paradigm shift” about Algeria, in particular, and the French colonial empire in general.

The book, which is available in French only, starts with a rich presentation of the historical context (what was happening in France, Algeria and around the world), and includes an extensive list of short biographies of the key actors in the period covered; it has also a substantial bibliography and an appendix with key documents such as the September 16, 1959 speech. It is worth reading for anyone interested in De Gaulle, the French Fifth Republic, and in how the “Peace of the Brave” was finally achieved. It is an account of the end of the Algerian war by one historian among many others who developed equally attractive perspectives on De Gaulle and the conflicts he faced—conflicts with himself, with ideological partners and opponents on the right and the left in France’s convoluted political dynamics of the time, conflict with fellow Frenchmen in Algeria, and conflict with the colonized Algerians.

* Benjamin Stora, *Le mystère De Gaulle: Son Choix Pour l’Algérie (The Mystery De Gaulle: His Choice for Algeria)* (Robert Laffont: 2009), 267 pages. ISBN 13: 9782221110768 - ISBN 10 : 2221110765