



Charles De Gaulle's Vision for a United Europe through his Second World War Speeches

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Abstract: Due to the Brexit agreement, the former French President Charles de Gaulle comes to the fore again. His veto of Britain's application to join the EEC (in 1963 and 1967) becomes timely today. In the past, he was treated as an obstacle to the European unification process, but today he is seen as an insightful politician with intuitive thinking. On this basis, an overall re-evaluation of his political trajectory may be necessary. This article focuses upon the speeches de Gaulle gave in the Second World War and proceeds to some remarks on how he truly envisaged an integrated Europe during that period of time.

Keywords: Charles de Gaulle, European Union, Foreign policy, Second World War

Charles De Gaulle'ün İkinci Dünya Savaşı Konuşmalarıyla Birleşik Avrupa Vizyonu

Öz: Brexit anlaşması ile eski Fransa Cumhurbaşkanı Charles de Gaulle yeniden gündeme geliyor. İngiltere'nin (1963 ve 1967'de) AET'ye katılma başvurusunu veto etmesi bugün tekrar tartışılıyor. De Gaulle geçmişte Avrupa'nın birleşme sürecinin önünde bir engel olarak görülüyordu ancak bugün sezgisel düşünceye sahip anlayışlı bir politikacı olarak görülüyor. Bu temelde, siyasi yörüngesinin genel olarak yeniden değerlendirilmesi gerekir. Bu makale, De Gaulle'ün İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nda yaptığı konuşmalara odaklanıyor ve o dönemde bütünleşmiş bir Avrupa'yı nasıl tasavvur ettiğine dair açıklamalarla devam ediyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, Charles de Gaulle, Dış Politika, İkinci Dünya Savaşı

1. Introduction

No other post-war statesman has been studied as much as de Gaulle, the fighter in World Wars I–II and President of France from 1958 to 1969. What has recently drawn special attention is his policy towards a European unification which has opened a debate on the problem of whether his motives were mainly of a geopolitical or an economic nature. The debate between “traditionalists” and “revisionists”, as it has come to be called, is limited to the years of his presidentship: the first are of the firm view that Charles de Gaulle's policy towards EEC (European Economic Community) and NATO (North Atlantic Alliance) was rooted in a grand political-military design. Without questioning de Gaulle's geopolitical motives with

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regard to NATO and nuclear weapons, the second group argues that his EEC policy has to be explained in terms of commercial-agricultural interests.¹ The complexities of the debate are reflected in cases that scholars have altered their initial opinions, following today a more revisionist stance (e.g. Ludlow, 1997; *idem*, 2010, pp.63–82).

Modern research is more excited about de Gaulle's foreign policy in his capacity as President of the Fifth Republic. We must not omit, though, that he also held a central role as deputy minister during France's occupation by Germany. In June 1940 he created the *France Libre*, the alternative government to the official one in Vichy which had collaborated with the Nazis. His provisional authority in London had from the very beginning the support of the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, but not of the President Franklin Roosevelt who treated de Gaulle as a potential dictator (things, however, changed in 1944, after the invasion of Normandy). This is a period with its own distinctive characteristics, because de Gaulle started his attempts to keep the French people united through his communication with a wide audience, to restore national pride, and to underpin the basis for a Europe that would become a lever for French influence in the world. The present paper discusses the speeches that de Gaulle delivered in war time and examines the roots of his policy on the promotion of the nation-state against any supranational integration. Despite the fact that France was under German control, de Gaulle adopted as early as 1940s a stance on a strategically and financially independent Europe, without altering its basic compositional elements throughout his military or political career.

De Gaulle cannot be regarded as the pioneer of the French idea of European integration. On 28 January 1925, the French Prime Minister, Édouard Herriot, spoke to the Chamber of Deputies about his desire to defend the French national interests through the creation of what he called “the United States of Europe” (Herriot, 1930). Later (on September 5, 1929), in a speech addressed to the Assembly of the League of Nations, the French Foreign Minister, Aristide Briand, made a new proposal for a “European Federal Union”. But the proposal was not fulfilled. Though the German Chancellor Gustav Stresemann approved it, the British and Italian delegates remained both silent and still (Weigall-Stirk, 1992, pp.11–15; Roobol, 2002, pp.32–46). In that period of time, de Gaulle was a Major with no clearly formed vision of a united Europe.

¹For some traditionalist views, see Trachtenberg, 2000, 101–116 and Martin, 2010, 291–308. Some important revisionist opinions are expressed by Moravcsik, 2000a, 3–43; *idem*, 2000b, 4–68.

2. Some remarks on de Gaulle's first speeches

Charles de Gaulle's first reference to European unification is recorded in his Albert Hall speech which was organized by French refugees on November 11, 1942 (De Gaulle, 1944, pp.283–286). That was the day of the Allied success at el Alamein, which marked the end of the great German expansion on all fronts. Three more speeches were held, all in Algiers, between July 14, 1943 (it was three days after the Allied amphibious invasion of Sicily) and April 21, 1944 (namely two weeks after the beginning of the Soviet advance into Romania). De Gaulle paid glowing tributes to the gallant achievements of Britain, America, and the Soviet Union. He undoubtedly had the ability and experience to perceive the strategic significance of these victories and the weak position of France when the Germans would negotiate their surrender. In those speeches, there are features worthy of attention and discussion: A) the focal point in them is de Gaulle's tributes of highest esteem to his country, her essential contribution to the promotion of European values as well as of the cultural heritage, and her key role on the Allied side; B) his idea of European unity was not the central topic in any of them; and C) all references to this idea are limited to only four out of the forty one speeches, or press conferences, that de Gaulle delivered between June 18, 1940 and August 25, 1944.²

A) De Gaulle was driven by the strong belief that his country's cultural legacy and rich heritage entitled her to a prominent leading position among nations (Harrison, 1981, pp.52–53). Can his statements about the French role in the war be seen as illusive? (Such is the view of Troitiño, 2008: 140). This is groundless. It is known that despite the armistice of June 1940, de Gaulle continued fighting against the Vichy regime of the Marshal Pétain and against the Germans in North Africa. There is no doubt that his war-time declarations, first and foremost, appealed to his countrymen. An efficient resistance campaign against the Germans would strengthen the French position in the post-war discussions. Indeed, the Free French second armored division took active part in the Normandy invasion, and the liberation of Paris (Robinson-Seignon, 2018, pp.28–37). That de Gaulle also appealed to the Allied Forces can be understood in the context of his speech which was given on March 18, 1944 in Algiers. The main points have been recorded by the American Intelligence Service; and among other things, de Gaulle said:

“Thanks to our attitude of patience and vigilance, the fundamentally friendly relations of the French people with their Allies remain excellent. In this 30 years' war France at Verdun saved the world. After June 1940 Churchill's Britain saved the world. Russian lined up on

²De Gaulle, 1951. The book contains de Gaulle's speeches and press conferences between 1940 and 1950.

the east is saving the world today. The United States will also have saved the world by the decisive support they have given through their men and material. There will be no salvation save through the combined power of these great States remaining united".³

But what is the rationale behind his reference to the battle of Verdun? Indeed, it was the longest (February, 21-December 18, 1916), but not necessarily the most decisive battle, as he presented it. Two reasons may explain this. First, de Gaulle had personally fought at Verdun. He was wounded, captured, and led into captivity. Second, the Frenchmen were engaged in that battle with no other participants on their side; and despite the tremendous losses they suffered, they scored a glorious victory. What purpose does the mention of Verdun serve? This answer may be found in the lines to follow: France and Britain had already saved the world. Now, that duty passed to Russia and America. One can see in the usage of tenses an indirect condemnation of the Soviets and Americans. Both of them entered that war (one, and one and a half years respectively) after France and other countries had been defeated. Thus, de Gaulle's declaration profoundly implies that France should be treated equally with the same respect as the other victors in that war.

B) The fact that his vision for a unified Europe was not the main theme in his speeches must not come to us as a surprise. The war was still raging, and the world was following the updates and recent developments on all fronts. As such, it was premature to begin thinking of peace and reconstruction of the countries that suffered most under Nazi occupation. More references are in de Gaulle's third speech at the Provisional Consultative Assembly on March 18, 1944. It is not coincidental that this speech was given almost ten days after the Americans launched the first daylight bombing raid on Berlin with great success (Caldwell-Muller, 2007, pp.172–174). The scales of victory had started tilting against the Nazis, although the war was prolonged for another year. In this respect, de Gaulle could foresee that the Allies would soon start preparing the ground for post-war dominance.

C) Similar argumentation may also apply to the limited mentions of European integration in his war-time speeches. Yet, there might be another angle to consider. At that early stage, Charles de Gaulle had every reason to disguise his country's strong economic dependence on Europe, which was vital for rebuilding her stature after the war. It merits notice that the Belgian statesman Paul-Henri Spaak (1969, p.170) describes de Gaulle as a skillful tactician who had the unique ability to hide his true intentions and reveal them all of a sudden.

³https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000388720.pdf, last accessed 2021/05/23. It should be noted that this speech is not included in the *La France sera la France*.

3. Forming the idea for European integration

To better understand when and why General de Gaulle started formulating the idea of European unification, we should go back to May-June 1940, when the German forces bypassed the Maginot line and invaded into France through the thick forests of the Ardennes in Belgium. On June 14, they entered Paris unopposed. That was a humiliating defeat for the Frenchmen whose attempt to construct in 1930s a very strong defence line against German invasion proved fruitless (Kaufmann-Kaufmann-Idzikowski, 2006, pp.163–175); but even more humiliating was the armistice that was concluded eight days later in the same railcar at the Compiègne forest where German representatives signed the ceasefire that ended the First World War in November 1918. De Gaulle, who was disturbed by the profound decline of French stature, had a double task. The first was to improve the nation's low self-esteem, as said above, and the second was to make his country return dynamically to the world map. In the opening section of his War Memoirs he writes that, "The positive side of my mind also assures me that France is not really herself unless she is in the front rank" (De Gaulle, 1955, p.9). Enlightened by this principle, de Gaulle designed his foreign policy towards Western Europe. His ideological and geopolitical convictions never changed despite the fact that his relations with Britain and the U.S. had been uneasy since 1940 (Knapp, 2021, pp.33–37, pp.53–56). It is true that these relations worsened after the Yalta Conference in 1945 where he was not invited by the other Allied leaders, though he had already signed with Stalin a Franco-Soviet Treaty in December 1944. Attributing his exclusion mostly to the U.S. President Roosevelt, Charles de Gaulle was very resentful, and he did not forgive them for the fact that they decided about Europe without the Europeans (Preston, 2020).

According to Georges-Henri Soutou (2007, p.22), de Gaulle tolerated the EEC integration due to tactical reasons which concern geopolitical interests. The very same view may also cover earlier years. De Gaulle's general reference to the need for European collaboration, at the Albert Hall in 1942, shows that he was yet developing his vision for a united Europe; but this was better determined later, when he advocated the formation of a big European economic grouping in association with the overseas French colonies.⁴ It seems therefore that behind his proposal for such a Europe was a large-scale aid he wished to receive in order to facilitate the post-war economic reconstruction of France for her national survival and military independence. He evidently knew very well where to begin, because in one of his speeches he declared that "nothing effective and solid can be done without the renewal of the state".⁵ He did not, however, deviate from his plans to bolster France's leadership in Europe, giving prominence to nation-states as

⁴De Gaulle, Ch.: speech of 18 March 1944. See also Chopra, 1974, 11–12.

⁵De Gaulle, Ch.: speech of 17 April 1948.

primary actors in any organization. De Gaulle's strong opposition to supranational institutions must not be interpreted to mean that he sought isolation, but he envisaged to build a Europe that would safeguard French sovereignty.

Although de Gaulle's geopolitical vision is not disputed by scholars, revisionists argue that his policy towards EEC was motivated a great deal by agricultural interests. Andrew Moravcsik (2012, p.59) goes even further, claiming that his political-military grand design was reduced to a secondary role. His argument relies on the remark that "Successful politicians. . . must trade off some goals against others". But it is rather difficult to believe that de Gaulle, who is described as an inflexible and confrontational politician – also renowned for his egotism and ruthlessness (see Johnson, 2008, p.231) – could be part of Moravcsik's general category. Additionally, the fact that he has been studied more than any other post-war figure, reveals that he should not be classified as just another successful politician. De Gaulle was of the definite view that history is mainly determined by geography (Johnson, 1991, p.597). This was the cornerstone of his foreign policy, since he never considered economic issues as valuable as geopolitical ones. It is worth noting that in one of his press conferences that was held in Paris, de Gaulle had spoken against the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), expressing his disinterest in the materialism of Brussels (Johnson, 2008, p.230). According to him, the protection and preservation of the moral and cultural values the state symbolizes are of much higher significance.

France's stability in 60s and 70s is regarded as one of the most striking phenomena in modern times. This stability is not irrelevant to the stability of de Gaulle's policies and decisions which derived from his vision of France as a role model for the world. His vision that profoundly shaped the spectrum of his foreign policy remained intact throughout his career. Was de Gaulle an obstacle to the European unity process? Indeed, his nationalistic approach to foreign affairs was a serious obstacle to the creation of supranational European organizations, since he strongly supported the idea of "L'Europe des patries" (Whitman, 1998, p.75). He never defied the creation of a European Europe, considering the enterprise as a counter-balance, especially to the U.S., under the reasonable fear that they would try to dominate the Continent with their military and economic power. A strategically independent Europe of states would secure its individual needs and political entity (Kolodziej, 1974, p.56). In order to stave off the American threat, de Gaulle proceeded to the establishment of the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) as early as 1945,⁶ believing that nuclear weapons could defend France and guarantee continental security.

His veto of the UK's double application to join the then European Community must be assessed under

⁶On de Gaulle's nuclear programme, see discussion by Gordon, 1999, 216–235.

the same conditions. The British were close allies of the U.S.; hence de Gaulle believed that they would join Europe to become the "Trojan horse for the Americans". It is not quite convincing that his decision was based on economic rather than on military and political criteria. Likewise, it is difficult to conclude whether his always uncompromising stance towards the British and their American allies was in retaliation for their attitude towards France in World War II. It seems that, in de Gaulle's diplomacy, Britain paid a costly price for her allegiance to the Americans, fearing that her entry into the Common Market would destroy politically and economically the European edifice. That could relegate France to a subordinate role, though de Gaulle aspired to create a Europe which would become the satellite of his country.

To conclude: De Gaulle, who from his early age was fully aligned with the values of the nation and its history, devoted himself to restore France to greatness. Whereas his country lacked economic or military resources to become one of the major guides of other nations, he pursued an assertive policy of grandeur to put into action his idealistic thoughts. Since the establishment of the government-in-exile in London in June 1940, de Gaulle started cultivating his vision of a unified Europe which was based on a belief in the centrality of nation-states against any supranational institutions. The military and political developments in the years to come helped him crystalize his idea, especially after he became President of France in 1958. All evidence leads to the safe conclusion that the core of his foreign policy remained unchanged throughout his entire career. What is more, the European Union as it exists today is a far cry from what de Gaulle had envisaged. He surely was aware that a unified Europe would entail problems, mostly when the collision between the various national interests would be at stake. He feared, however, that problems would be more in the supranational Europe he wished to avoid. In this light, it seems that Garret Martin is fairly right to assume that between a bad Europe and no Europe, de Gaulle would most likely probably choose the second (Martin, 2010, p.296).

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