

De Gaulle and Europe

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Abstract

General de Gaulle understood Europe as a key geographical and historical construct. From the Second World War until he left power in 1969, he wanted European states to join together and cooperate closely, because he saw this is a means of increasing their power, particularly that of France. However, he was hostile to any loss of sovereignty, seeing it as a possibly prelude to subjugation by the United States.

Article

A man of culture, Charles de Gaulle understood Europe as the product of geography and history, transcending the artificial and ephemeral divisions inherited from wars. As such, he argued that Europe stretched from Gibraltar to the Urals, an assertion that he repeated many times throughout his life. As such, he refused, after 1945, to accept the Iron Curtain as definitive and to consider Europe as one and the same as “the West,” i.e. as the ally of the United States in the Cold War and the enemy of the Eastern Bloc. Yet for all that, he did not seek to please the USSR, which his famous phrase amputated of the three quarters of its territory beyond the Urals. In fact, he always preferred to speak of “Russia” rather than the USSR because, to his mind, regimes come and go whereas nations endure. His Europe, defined in these broad terms, was destined to play a pre-eminent role in the world. In his famous speech at the University of Strasbourg on 22 November 1959 he declared “Yes, it is Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, it is Europe, all of Europe, which will decide the fate of the world!” He viewed historical and geographical Europe as a means of combining and increasing the power of the states of the continent, states which he saw as Europe’s unalterable horizon.

To this end, it was necessary for these states, starting with those closest, to come together, as he stated in his speech in Algiers on 18 March 1944. It was also necessary for the most powerful among them to set an example in their cooperation. On 10 December 1944, France and the USSR signed a mutual cooperation treaty under his aegis. De Gaulle also had high hopes concerning Great Britain, even though he remained clear-sighted about the nature of the “special relationship” between Washington and London. His hopes were quickly dashed. In contrast, when the spectre of an imperialist Reich had been laid to rest he attempted to bring Germany back into play. Speaking in Bordeaux on 25 September 1949, he first evoked the idea of a confederation of European peoples

that might arise from a vast popular referendum in all European countries, assigning a decisive role to the Franco-German couple. "Europe shall or shall not come into being, depending on whether a direct agreement is possible, or not, between the Germanic and Gallic peoples." The partnership he formed with Adenauer from 1958 onwards led to the signing of the Elysée Treaty on 22 January 1963, the culmination of a Franco-German policy that subsequently went through a more difficult period because of the Atlanticism that de Gaulle attributed to Adenauer's successors.

This same Atlanticism, which he saw as a likely prelude to the subjugation of Europe by the United States, made him fight against the project for a European Defence Community (EDC) when he was no longer in power in the 1950s. He was nevertheless in favour of European defence cooperation based on an alliance of independent sovereign states, which would take the form of a combined General Staff deciding on common plans, giving orders and allocating resources.

When he returned to power, he sought to uphold the idea of a Europe of nations that cooperated closely, including at the political level, through frequent intergovernmental consultation, but that remained fiercely independent vis-à-vis the outside world and preserved their freedom through unanimous decision-making, as he confided to the Italian Prime Minister Fanfani on 7 August 1958. On the other hand, he felt that the institutions of the Common Market and Euratom that he inherited had "their technical value, but do not and cannot have authority and, thereby, political efficacy." He fundamentally rejected their supranational character as, in any field whatsoever, "a supranational Europe is a Europe under American command." From 1960, he tried to modify these institutions in consultation with Adenauer, but soon met with several difficulties: the opposition of the United States, the weight of defence issues and their link to NATO, the functioning of the European institutions which had been in existence for several months and were beginning to find their feet, and finally the resistance of the political class inside and outside France. A committee led by Christian Fouchet, set up in February 1961, put forward a plan the following autumn for a common foreign and defence policy based on intergovernmental cooperation. The unconcealed hostility of the Netherlands, the opposition of a large part of Adenauer's ruling majority (even within the CDU itself) and the idea of involving Great Britain in the project—a potential entrant into the common market viewed by de Gaulle as the Trojan Horse of the United States—encouraged de Gaulle to throw down the gauntlet by modifying the plan in a more restrictive way in January 1962. He removed the paragraph that foresaw "the respect of the structures outlined in the Treaties of Paris and Rome establishing the European Communities." Not surprisingly, the five other member states rejected the Fouchet Plan. The prospect of a political Europe then became even more distant following the press conference of 15 May 1962, in which de Gaulle declared "there cannot be any Europe other than that of the [nation] states, apart from in myths, fiction and parades." The following day, the five ministers from the MRP (*Mouvement républicain populaire*) in favour of a federal Europe resigned from the government. In his vision of Europe, Britain was an obstacle to French influence as well as to the geopolitical coherence of a

continent that could be reunited and freed from the bipolar framework of the Cold War. “Perfidious Albion,” he believed, would always serve, first and foremost, the interests of the transatlantic special relationship sealed in 1915. In 1963 and 1967, de Gaulle rejected the British applications, with American backing, for entry into the Common Market.

Nevertheless, in the mind of General de Gaulle, European integration was a means of ensuring France’s place in the world, by putting an end to French resistance to change. While he instructed his government to carry out the “empty chair” policy—the absence of France from the meetings of the Council of Ministers of the EEC—from June 1965 to January 1966 to avoid a “Europe of the Americans,” being ready to break off ties with the EEC if he failed, because “it is better to have independence than a subjugated Common Market,” he was satisfied with having won out in the end. He even described himself in private as ‘the only true European’ and took pride in the fact that he had breathed life into what had still been “a notebook of papers” ten years earlier. To this cost the complete elimination of customs duties within the Europe of the Six, as foreseen by the Treaty of Rome, came into effect in the European Economic Community (EEC) on 1 July 1968, 18 months earlier than originally anticipated. De Gaulle even went so far as to envisage a gradual enlargement of the jurisdiction of the European authorities in the future and perhaps even the emergence, a century in the future, of a European nation, so long as the Europeans would be ready to die for the European idea. It is difficult to know how much of the latter claim should be put down to cynicism and how much to conviction.

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