

CHAPTER
32

HISTORYMAKERS

Charles de Gaulle
Man of Destiny

Section 1

"An anxious concern about the fate of our country came as second nature to my three brothers, my sister, and myself."—de Gaulle

Charles de Gaulle, devoted to France, fought for his nation in two world wars. In a life full of ironies, he gave ammunition to his future enemies and made life difficult for his former allies.

De Gaulle came from a family deeply involved in French history. Two relatives had fought the English during the Hundred Years' War, one of them at the famous Battle of Agincourt in 1415. Other relatives had served as king's counselors or written histories of France. His father had fought in the French army that suffered the humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

In 1909, young Charles decided to join the army, and he entered the French military academy. He was not a good student, and the school's report judged him "average in everything but height." He stood six feet five inches tall. Soon after his graduation, World War I erupted. Captain de Gaulle led a company in the fierce Battle of Verdun. He was wounded badly and left on the field for dead. He did not die but was instead taken to a German prisoner of war camp. He tried to escape five times. After the last failed attempt, he was held in solitary confinement for four months.

After the war, de Gaulle wrote military strategy. Before World War I, the French command used the coordinated attack of masses of soldiers to win wars. When the Germans swept through the French lines during that war, thinking changed. Now, the generals emphasized defense and built a strong line of forts and artillery to protect France. After seeing the tank in the First World War, de Gaulle was convinced that it would give offensive forces the advantage and that the new defensive strategy was wrong. He pushed his views with great vigor and emotion, angering his superiors by attacking them. As a result, his career suffered. However, his strategy was read in Germany, and in World War II they used his ideas against France.

During the Second World War, de Gaulle proved himself an able field commander, but in 1940 the Germans rolled over the French army. Henri Pétain, who was in charge of the government, wanted to surrender, which angered de Gaulle.

Called by Winston Churchill "the man of destiny," de Gaulle escaped one night on a plane to England. The next day, he made a defiant radio broadcast calling on the French to continue the fight against Germany. Some weeks later, a French military court found him guilty of treason and sentenced him to death.

With a handful of followers and a history of conflict with fellow officers, de Gaulle was not in an ideal position to lead a French government in exile. However, he established credible leadership. He used radio broadcasts to inspire the French people and kept in touch with underground fighters in France. On August 25, 1944, French troops became the first Allied forces to enter Paris. They were followed by de Gaulle himself, who was made prime minister by the legislature later that year.

De Gaulle grew disgusted with politicians, and in a year he retired. He formed a popular movement in 1947 but stayed outside the government. France reached a crisis, though, in 1958, and de Gaulle agreed to lead his nation again. He was made president and given broad powers. He ruled for a decade, creating order at home and pursuing an independent course abroad that often annoyed his former allies. He kept Britain out of the economic grouping called the Common Market (now the European Community). He angered the United States by reducing French involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and made friendly gestures to Communist nations. He also criticized U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In these actions, de Gaulle sought to give France a larger role in world affairs. In the end, he isolated France from other nations. He retired in 1969 after losing a vote of support. He died later that year.

Questions

- Determining Main Ideas** What was the driving force in de Gaulle's life? Explain your answer.
- Drawing Conclusions** Explain the two major ironies of de Gaulle's professional life.
- Forming and Supporting Opinions** Was de Gaulle's character better suited to the army or politics? Explain.