

De Gaulle: The Man Who Said 'NON'

Exiled in London in June 1940, with France on the brink of defeat, Charles de Gaulle broadcast a speech that was to create an enduring bond between him and his country, writes Jonathan Fenby.

The morning of June 18th, 1940 was a moment of intense concentration for both Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle. In Whitehall, the prime minister was putting the final touches to his great 'Blood, Sweat and Tears' speech given to the Commons later that day. Across central London, in a small flat off Park Lane lent to him by a French officer, the two-star general, who had flown out of France the previous day as its government sought an armistice with the advancing German troops, scrawled the text of a broadcast address calling on the French people not to abandon the struggle against the Nazi invaders.

De Gaulle's speech was the result of an offer made by Churchill for him to speak to France on the BBC. It would go down as perhaps de Gaulle's most celebrated statement – *l'Appel du 18 juin* – and the date would become an iconic anniversary for him and his country. The broadcast that evening by the 49-year-old general would form the foundation of what grew into Gaullism and propelled him to the leadership of his nation. It marked him out as 'the man who said no' and fulfilled his sense of historic destiny at a moment when the political establishment caved in to defeat and completed the collapse of the Third Republic that had ruled France for six and a half decades. But the historic broadcast, to be commemorated this month by President Sarkozy during a state visit to Britain, nearly did not take place.

The British Cabinet met that morning without Churchill who was busy with his speech. The Minister of Information, Duff Cooper, mentioned that de Gaulle was planning to talk on the BBC that evening and gave an outline of what the Frenchman planned to say. The Cabinet decided that the broadcast would be 'undesirable'. Britain was still hoping to maintain a relationship with the new government set up in Bordeaux under the First World War hero, Marshal Pétain, to avoid it siding with the Germans. Churchill was particularly anxious to ensure that the powerful French fleet did not fall into Nazi hands.

Unaware of this, de Gaulle worked on his text with a pen dipped into an inkwell. He then went to lunch with Duff Cooper, who did not tell him of the Cabinet decision. But Cooper did tip off Edward Spears, a general who had been Churchill's personal envoy to the previous French government and had brought de Gaulle to England in his plane the day before. Spears went to see Churchill in the afternoon to argue that the general should go ahead with his broadcast because it would give French resistance a focus and might induce the remnants of France's air force to fly to Britain. The prime minister replied that he would authorise the broadcast if members of the Cabinet would change their minds. Looking 'miserable and hot', according to an eyewitness, Spears set off to speak to the ministers individually.

As he did so, de Gaulle returned to Mayfair to complete the final draft of his speech. When he had finished he gave it to Elisabeth de Méribel, a member of the French economic mission in London, who typed it up on a portable typewriter and assisted in deciphering the general's angular handwriting and the many changes made by Geoffroy Chodron de Courcel, de Gaulle's aide-de-camp.

'Consulted one by one, Cabinet members agreed that de Gaulle should be authorised to speak', according to a note added to the record of the earlier decision. In the early evening, wearing a uniform with leggings and polished boots, the Frenchman took a taxi to BBC Broadcasting House near Oxford Circus.

France in meltdown

It was only 13 days since de Gaulle, the career soldier, had come to general public notice after being appointed as deputy minister of defence in the government headed by the conservative politician Paul Reynaud, who himself held the defence portfolio. De Gaulle had made his name during the 1930s as an unorthodox military thinker and proponent of tank warfare who clashed with the army establishment. He had distinguished himself leading armoured units in two valiant but unsuccessful attempts to check the German advance, actions which had earned him promotion to the rank of a two-star general. In the face of the rout of the French army, he advocated continued resistance, to be achieved, if necessary, by moving the government across the Mediterranean to one of France's possessions in North Africa.

However, those who supported the seeking of an armistice gained the ascendancy as the government abandoned Paris and headed south to the relative safety of Bordeaux. Among them were the second-ranking member of the Reynaud administration, the 84-year-old Marshal Pétain, and the Commander-in-Chief, Maxime Weygand, somewhat less ancient at 73. For them, the situation was hopeless. The British had withdrawn many of their troops in the Dunkirk evacuation completed at the beginning of June; the Wehrmacht's tanks were advancing so fast that some ran out of fuel; millions of refugees clogged the roads: France was in meltdown.

The tough-minded Minister of the Interior, Georges Mandel, wanted to continue the struggle but Reynaud wavered, harassed by his pro-German mistress, the Countess de Portes. De Gaulle became increasingly isolated in his insistence that France must not surrender; Pétain, who had been de Gaulle's mentor before they fell out in the mid-1930s, called him vain and ungrateful, Weygand dismissed him as 'a child', while the navy chief, François Darlan, said he was mad. More presciently, Reynaud's Chief of Staff, Dominique Leca, noted that the new junior minister was acting 'like a star' because he realised that France would need 'a resurrection myth' if it was to recover from defeat, a myth de Gaulle was starting to create around himself.

One of de Gaulle's responsibilities was military liaison with the British and he had paid his first visit to London on June 9th to try to convince Churchill to commit more forces to the defence of France. Explaining why this was impossible, the prime minister launched into a virtuoso display

of rhetoric delivered half in English and half in his idiosyncratic French as he strode up and down.

Though de Gaulle got nowhere, since Churchill was intent on conserving Britain's resources for the battle that would follow the fall of France, the visit was important for his future in establishing contact with the prime minister. Churchill was further impressed when he flew to meet the French leaders near Orléans on June 10th and found the general to be one of the few who wanted to fight on. Oliver Harvey, from the British embassy, described de Gaulle as: 'the only calm and intelligent soldier left.' He was, Spears wrote: 'straight, direct, even rather brutal . . . a strange-looking man, enormously tall; sitting at the table, he dominated everybody else by his height . . . His heavily-hooded eyes were very shrewd.'

The Man of Destiny

Back in London, Churchill told colleagues he thought a great deal of the general. During a second visit to meet Reynaud, this time in the city of Tours, he saw de Gaulle, who had arrived as the meeting ended, standing in a doorway. According to the prime minister's memoirs, he murmured '*L'homme du destin*'. The Frenchman remained impassive; he may not have heard the words or they may have been a retrospective Churchillian insertion into history.

On June 14th the French government settled into Bordeaux while the Germans occupied Paris. De Gaulle undertook another mission to London to try to muster British naval support for an evacuation of the government to North Africa. No plane was available, so he drove through the night to take a boat from Brittany, calling to see his wife and three children who had taken refuge there; he did not, to his regret, have time to call on his aged mother who was also living in the region. 'Things are very bad,' he told his wife, Yvonne. He entrusted the family silver, linen, furs, financial securities and his papers to the safekeeping of a local woman. He then embraced the children and got back into his car. His son, Philippe, stood at the door watching the black Renault disappear in a cloud of dust, not knowing when he would see his father again.

Arriving in Plymouth on the morning of June 16th, de Gaulle and the 27-year-old de Courcel took the night train to London, sleeping in their seats. The general went to the Hyde Park Hotel, where he was shaving when he received a visit from the French Ambassador, Charles Corbin, and the international official and banker, Jean Monnet, who was supervising French arms purchases in London. They put forward an extraordinary proposal for a Franco-British political union; even more extraordinary, this was accepted by the British Cabinet in a bid to bolster French resolve.

Reynaud greeted the proposal as a masterstroke but, when the French government met that evening, the defeatists were ready: Hélène de Portes had read the text dictated on the telephone from London by de Gaulle and Reynaud's telephone was probably being tapped. Believing German victory over Britain to be inevitable, Pétain said union would tie France to a corpse. Reynaud's mistress sent him a note saying she hoped he was not going to act like the 15th-century queen, Isabel, who had signed a treaty marrying her daughter to Henry V of

England, passing France's royal succession to the English. The prime minister resigned and the aged marshal was called on to form a government. 'It is with a heavy heart that I tell you today that the combat must be ended,' Pétain declared in a national broadcast.

De Gaulle only learned of the events in Bordeaux when he returned to France that night in a plane lent to him by the British. He saw Reynaud at 11pm and said he intended to go to Britain to continue the combat. The newly resigned premier arranged for him to receive 100,000 francs from secret government funds, though, according to one of his staff, he remarked: 'De Gaulle is doing the wrong thing; he is undisciplined.'

Flight to London

Accounts of what happened next vary. The Gaullist version has him pursuing a dignified course at a pace of his own choosing. But Spears wrote of de Gaulle sheltering behind a column on the ground floor of the building where Reynaud had his office and hailing him and the British Ambassador, Ronald Campbell, in a loud whisper when they went to see the former prime minister. Weygand intended to arrest him, de Gaulle said, according to Spears' account. When the two Englishmen left the building de Gaulle was waiting for them and accepted an offer of a flight to London in the morning.

Despite the help he gave the general in 1940, Spears and de Gaulle later had a major disagreement over British and French authority in Syria and Lebanon where the British general was posted; so Gaullists (and most French biographers of de Gaulle) have dismissed the Spears version as a bid to diminish the French-man's standing. The truth is elusive, but clearly the Englishman's account does not fit with the image of a great man moving serenely towards his destiny.

During the night of June 16th, the general told his staff of his decision to leave France. 'I did not want to take a whole tribe along,' he said later. Only de Courcel, accompanied him, though a former private secretary gave him the keys to the Mayfair flat.

On the morning of June 17th de Gaulle was driven to the airport with de Courcel. In his suitcase were a pair of trousers, four shirts and a photograph of his family. Stopping at military headquarters on the way, he raised his arms and said: 'The Germans have lost the war. They are beaten and France must go on fighting.' Then he drove to the airfield and boarded a Dragon Rapide biplane.

Again the accounts differ. Spears recalled a confused exit using subterfuge in which he hauled de Gaulle into the plane at the last moment after de Courcel had stowed the luggage. The French version depicts it as a smooth departure, though in a memorandum to Churchill in 1948 de Gaulle acknowledged that 'some precautions' had been undertaken. The party flew up the Atlantic coast; below them a flotilla of ships in the Loire estuary was rescuing the last British soldiers from France and the troop carrier *Lancastria* was bombed by a German plane and sank off St Nazaire with the loss of at least 3,500 lives.

They then crossed Brittany, where de Gaulle's family was and where his 80-year-old mother was dying. The general stared ahead, reflecting, he told his son later, on the scale of the 'adventure' he was undertaking. For somebody raised in a tradition of loyalty and service, it was, he acknowledged, an appalling responsibility.

When the plane landed in Jersey to refuel, Spears got a cup of coffee for the general. Taking a sip, de Gaulle thought he had been served tea. 'It was his first introduction to the tepid liquid which, in England, passes for either one or the other,' Spears wrote. 'His martyrdom had begun.'

Speaking for France

In the BBC studio de Gaulle was asked to say something to check sound levels. He uttered the single word: 'France'. Then, his voice a little stiff, he launched into his text. He was pale and his forelock stuck to his forehead. June 18th, the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, was hardly the most propitious moment at which to declare that, in the words of a later Gaullist proclamation, 'France has lost a battle, but not the war.' Both Washington and Moscow recognised the Pétain government. In Munich, Hitler and Mussolini met to plan the future. Stalin remained in alliance with Berlin. Roosevelt was promising American mothers that he would not send their sons to fight in a war in far-off lands.

'Has the last word been said?' de Gaulle asked. 'Must hope disappear? Is defeat final?' To which he had a simple answer: 'No!' France was not alone in what was a worldwide struggle, he insisted three times. It had its overseas possessions, could align itself with the British Empire and 'use without limit the immense industry of the United States'. Then he invited French officers and soldiers who had crossed to Britain, mainly in the Dunkirk evacuation, to get into contact with him.

The speech was recorded to be broadcast at 10 pm. After dining with de Courcel at the nearby Langham Hotel, de Gaulle went back to the Park Lane flat. Very few people heard his words that night. Among them, according to a relative present in Brittany at the time, was de Gaulle's mother. She pulled the sleeve of a clergyman who had alerted her to the broadcast in advance and said: 'That's my son, Monsieur le curé. That's my son.' Though the newspapers in Bordeaux ignored it, there were reports in the press in Lyon and Marseille. The reaction from the French government was restrained; the ambassador in London was instructed to tell the British that it was an 'unfriendly gesture' to allow a French officer to broadcast against the Pétain administration. Despite its historic nature, the recording was not kept by the BBC and de Gaulle had to make a new version a few days later.

It would take some days for de Gaulle to assume the leadership of the Free French movement; first he appealed to more senior officers to join him but they demurred. Still, the speech on June 18th was the turning point for a man who had nurtured a strong sense of his destiny for more than two decades. It was a spectacular act of presumption. He was a newly promoted general in a chain of command that reached up to two eminent figures, Pétain and Weygand, both of whom he disavowed. He had no mandate to defy a legally constituted government. He

had never been elected to any post and had held a junior government position for just 12 days. Nobody important accompanied him to London. Though Churchill greeted him warmly, other members of the British Establishment were more reserved, as the Cabinet's initial decision on his speech had shown.

But the general was a great gambler, ready to take supreme risks to achieve his aims for France and for himself. This would apply when he dominated the Resistance at the Liberation in 1944, when he stalked out of office two years later and when he orchestrated a brilliant return to power in 1958. At a crucial point later in his life, when he had staked everything on the Fifth Republic, he likened himself to a high stakes poker player facing opposition politicians playing the café card game of *belote*.

So, as the Pétain government signed an armistice with the Germans on June 22nd, de Gaulle advanced his claims to leadership in another broadcast, saying:

Honour, common sense and the superior interests of the nation command all the Free French to continue fighting wherever they are and however they can ... I, General de Gaulle, am starting this national task here in England. I invite all the French who want to remain free to listen to me and to follow me.

When British efforts to get more prominent Frenchmen, such as Mandel, to cross to London came to nothing, they were left with no alternative but to work with the general. On June 23rd de Gaulle wrote to Churchill to propose the formation of a French National Committee to continue the war alongside the British. This was agreed and promptly announced. The committee's object was defined as being 'to maintain the independence of France, to honour her alliances and to contribute to the war effort of the Allies'.

At the end of the month, the British formally recognised the general as 'Leader of all Free Frenchmen, wherever they may be, who rally to him in support of the Allied Cause'. Churchill told him: 'You stand alone. So what? I recognise you alone.' On the BBC the general declared: 'I take under my authority all the French who remain in British territories or who come there.'

The lonely giant

In public de Gaulle followed his own advice that leaders should show 'cold dignity'. Those who called on him in June 1940 found him remote and reserved, apparently lacking in humour or concern for others. His height made an immediate impact as he stood bolt upright in uniform and jodhpurs. The future Nobel Prize-winner François Jacob described the impression he made as 'gothic'. Albin Chalandon, who would become a minister under the Fifth Republic, was struck by his extremely piercing gaze, but also by the way in which his mind seemed to be elsewhere at the same time – 'he was impenetrable'.

'His features evoked, at first, a medieval drawing,' recalled the journalist Pierre Maillaud, who

went to see the general the day after his first broadcast: 'There was in his eyes an abstract fire, capable of suddenly flaring up ... a nobleness and reserve, a superficial shyness and a singular pride.'

That image was essential, but it masked a hugely complex character with deeply concealed emotions. He harboured intense feelings, particularly in his love for his second daughter, Anne, who had Down's Syndrome. Without her, he said, 'perhaps I should not have done all that I have done'. He was eternally disappointed by the failure of fellow humans to live up to his standards; the French people were not worthy of the grandeur of their nation and most foreign countries were dismissed as inadequate.

Churchill found, in his often difficult partner, a 'great capacity for feeling pain'. A visitor in 1940 saw in de Gaulle's eyes the sadness 'of those who know that history is tragic and who discover that suddenly they are in charge of making it'. His whole life, the general remarked, consisted of making people do what they did not want to do. His tragedy was that 'I respect only those who stand up to me, but I find such people intolerable.'

According to his son, he wondered if he was doing something mad, 'throwing myself into the water without knowing where the bank is ... I put myself in God's hands'. He was sentenced to death by a military tribunal in France and he soon faced the ordeal of the British attack on the French fleet in North Africa. But there was no turning back. As Maillaud, one of his early followers, put it: 'With him, it is take it or leave it, serving the Resistance and national honour, uncompromisingly demanding. With him, we would have to get use to breathing the rarefied air of the summits.'

When the jurist, René Cassin, asked him on what basis he justified the Free French movement, the simple Gaullist answer was: 'We are France.'

Jonathan Fenby's biography, *The General: De Gaulle and the France He Saved*, is published by Simon & Schuster this month.

Further Reading:

Rod Keward, *La Vie En Bleu: France and the French Since 1900* (Penguin, 2006); Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995); Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: Daily Life in the Heart of France During the German Occupation* (Pan, 2003); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life Under the Occupation* (Penguin, 2007); Robert Gildea, *France Since 1945* (OUP, 2002).

Official site of the 70th anniversary of de Gaulle's broadcast: www.appeldu18juin70eme.org

For further articles on this subject, visit: www.historytoday.com/france

