

## **The Evolution of Charles de Gaulle as Leader of la France Libre during World War II (1940–1942)**

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### **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the German conquest of France in 1940, Charles de Gaulle fled his homeland for Great Britain. Over time, this courageous French military officer became the image of Free France (*La France libre*). Yet how did Charles de Gaulle, with little political experience and a blurred relationship with the new French Resistance (*La résistance française*), become the wartime leader of the fighting French force in World War II? Focusing on the decisive month of June 1940, my study offers a new, balanced interpretation of de Gaulle as France's wartime leader in Great Britain and his dependence on Winston Churchill and the British government. Based on extensive research from primary and secondary sources, my conclusions underscore Charles de Gaulle's lack of political experience and consequential mistakes in his initial moments of leadership while also revealing his development as one of France's greatest politicians. This article is a piece of my larger Honors Thesis, which can be accessed at Elon University's Belk Library.

**Keywords:** World War II, Charles de Gaulle, la France libre, France

### **1. Introduction**

Though he had uncontested power later in life, Charles de Gaulle began his political career in 1940 with minimal experience and few qualifications, making him susceptible to political critique. His passion for the honor of France and his determination to continue fighting recommended him to British politicians of Parliament when he arrived in London on 17 June, but his credentials ended there. The uncertain future of the Bordeaux government—which was renamed the Vichy government after moving to the spa town of Vichy on 1 July 1940—limited his supporters among British politicians, but “L’Appeal” won the British people’s support. Surprisingly, within eleven days of his arrival, the British Foreign Office changed their policy and recognized de Gaulle as the leader of *la France libre* (LFL). Based on his lack of political experience and minimal notoriety, Charles de Gaulle was not the Foreign Office’s first choice for LFL. Instead, he filled a political void that was crucial for Churchill’s “policy of confrontation,” which also included Operations Susan and Operation Catapult, in order to undermine the power of the Bordeaux government.

European military leaders knew of de Gaulle’s radical military theories, but his recognition did not extend outside of this very small audience. In 1934, de Gaulle received significant attention for his book *Vers l’Armée de Métier*, in which he emphasized the influence of tanks in military maneuvers. French military theorists hotly contested de Gaulle’s radical ideas on tank warfare; British military students simply ignored his theories for offensive tactics.<sup>1</sup> The Germans, however, read his book and adopted his strategy for a mechanized army in the blitzkrieg, or “lightening war.” Combining Panzer spearheads, the Wehrmacht infantry, and the Luftwaffe air forces, German military strategists used de Gaulle’s theories to conquer Europe. In contrast, the French ignored de Gaulle’s pleas to invest in tanks and instead poured their money into the Maginot Line.<sup>2</sup> One of the only Frenchman to support de Gaulle’s ideas was Paul Reynaud, President of the Third Republic from 21 March–18 June 1940.<sup>3</sup> When Reynaud came to power, he gave de Gaulle the tanks for which he had asked, but it was too little, too late. The 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment Tank Brigade was an incomplete regiment of makeshift tanks, but de Gaulle capitalized on the opportunity and gave the Germans “a taste of their own medicine” at the battles of Laon and Abbeville.<sup>4</sup> Besides the German military leaders and few French politicians, de Gaulle remained invisible to the

public and international sectors until he became the leader of *LFL*.

Paul Reynaud named de Gaulle as his Under-Secretary of State for National Defense on 5 June due to his notable service at Laon and Abbeville. De Gaulle left the fields of battle to fight another battle against the pacifists and defeatists of the Third Republic. De Gaulle offered radical ideas to the Council and countered the opposition by suggesting that France exhaust every avenue of resistance before surrendering. These avenues included guerilla warfare and an alliance with the British government.<sup>5</sup> Because of de Gaulle's resolve, Reynaud made him France's representative to London throughout the tumultuous month of June 1940.<sup>6</sup> As Reynaud's representative, de Gaulle first met Prime Minister Winston Churchill on 7 June. Churchill immediately recognized a renewed French resolve in de Gaulle, of whom he applauded in a letter to President Roosevelt, saying, "Reynaud on the other hand is for fighting on and he has a young General de Gaulle who believes much can be done."<sup>7</sup> Churchill had few men to praise in the Third Republic, for on 11 June, the French government abandoned Paris to the Germans and fled to Bordeaux in the Aquitaine region. Reynaud, disheartened by the role of pacifism and defeatism in his government, sent de Gaulle to London on 16 June in order to discover a solution with the British government and reverse the stronghold of defeatists in the Bordeaux government. De Gaulle returned to France on 17 June and discovered that their attempts to keep France in the war had failed. Despite Pétain's orders to stay in France, de Gaulle escaped to London on the same day. *The Times* described de Gaulle's flight to London as "the French contingent in the crusade for the recovery both of the soil and of the soul of France."<sup>8</sup> This was the extent of de Gaulle's political expertise before fleeing France on 17 June, making him a poor candidate to lead a political as well as military resistance in *LFL*.

## 2. Body of Paper

Since Charles de Gaulle had few diplomatic qualifications, the enforcement of Great Britain's foreign policy played the greatest factor in his career, for his appointment as leader of *LFL* arose from a division between Winston Churchill and the Foreign Office over British interests in the Bordeaux government. Winston Churchill promoted a "policy of confrontation" against Marshal Pétain, who assumed power after Reynaud resigned on 18 June. In Churchill's opinion, Pétain was an untrustworthy defeatist who had strong Anglophobic sentiments.<sup>9</sup> In opposition to Pétain, Churchill proposed the creation of a dissident French government that would continue the war. He attempted to implement this idea when he allowed Charles de Gaulle to speak on the BBC on 18 June. Delivering "L'Appeal," de Gaulle called free Frenchmen everywhere to contact his fighting movement in Britain. This contradicted the Foreign Office's "policy of accommodation" in which Pétain was upheld as the hero of Verdun, unable to support an embarrassing treaty with Nazi Germany.<sup>10</sup> Dispatchers from the Bordeaux government assured the Foreign Office that France would continue the war, moving their government to colonial North Africa and fighting from France's extensive empire. Accordingly, the Foreign Office sent Jean Monnet, a Frenchman who had been overseeing the collectivization of British and French war industries under Reynaud's government, to Bordeaux with a British promise to help Pétain move to North Africa. On 20 June, the Foreign Office stopped appealing for French colonial authorities to oppose Pétain. The Foreign Office revoked de Gaulle's use of the BBC and created a Committee on French Resistance on 21 June to support the Bordeaux government.<sup>11</sup> Since British foreign policy dictated de Gaulle's access to the French public and his position as a French political exile, de Gaulle was powerless to act as the leader of all free Frenchmen. By these actions, the Foreign Office's "policy of accommodation" overpowered Winston Churchill's "policy of confrontation," which left de Gaulle in a powerless position.

British foreign policy dramatically changed on 22 June, and de Gaulle's chances for power increased as British support of Pétain decreased. On 22 June, to the "grief and amazement" of the Foreign Office, the Bordeaux government accepted Nazi Germany's terms of surrender.<sup>12</sup> Pétain agreed to the humiliating terms of Hitler's treaty, in which he required France to actively fight against Great Britain with the Axis Powers.<sup>13</sup> In an unprecedented treaty, the Nazis allotted Pétain's Bordeaux government a small measure of autonomy to govern the southern region of France, for unlike the Slavs and Eastern Europeans, the Nazis believed the French belonged to the Aryan Race, who deserved more power and better treatment. The Nazis reserved for themselves the northern half of France from which to attack Great Britain using French air, naval, and military forces. The "policy of accommodation" had failed. Now in agreement with Churchill's "policy of confrontation," the Foreign Office revoked their manifesto of 21 June and allowed de Gaulle to make another broadcast on 22 June, delivering "L'Appeal" for a second time. The British government recalled their French ambassador Sir Ronald Campbell and Jean Monnet from Bordeaux on the same day, ending all formal diplomatic relations with Pétain's government. The Foreign Office also resumed their appeals to French colonial authorities to denounce the Bordeaux government as "a tool of the enemy."<sup>14</sup> From 22 June until the end of the war, the Foreign Office did not consider the Bordeaux government as an ally. The Foreign Office thus concurred with Churchill's "policy of confrontation."

Now that the Foreign Office supported his policy, Churchill addressed the immediate threats of French

capitulation in a three-pronged attack, in which de Gaulle would play an indispensable role. Because France surrendered before exhausting its resources, the Nazis controlled a strong and prosperous empire to use against the island nation of Great Britain. Churchill's first concern was the French fleet, one of the most sophisticated fleets in the world. If it fell into the hands of the Nazis, Hitler's forces would crush Great Britain.<sup>15</sup> France's colonial empire also concerned Churchill. The colonies of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia provided strategic locations to launch an attack on Great Britain and her empire. In response to these concerns, Churchill proposed to form *LFL*, a dissident French government that would represent the real France and keep her in the war. Churchill next initiated Operation Susan in which British forces would invade Morocco and overthrow Pétain's officials. Churchill included Charles de Gaulle in his first two steps, but he did not include de Gaulle in the third step: Catapult. In Catapult, Churchill proposed to shell the French navy at Mers-el-Kébir in order to prevent the Germans from utilizing French resources against the British. The three parts of Churchill's "policy of confrontation" guarded British interests.

The policy's first step was to create a dissident government that would replace the Bordeaux government. As Sir Ernest Llewellyn Woodward records in the official history of Great Britain's role in World War II, the Foreign Office supported this action on 23 June by asserting the authority of the British government:

The British government therefore could not recognize the Bordeaux government as that of an independent country. At the same time, the British government took note of the formation of a Provisional French National Committee, fully representing independent French elements, and declared that they would recognize such a Committee and deal with it on all matters concerning the prosecution of the war as long as it continued to represent all French elements resolved to fight the common enemy.<sup>16</sup>

This statement supported Great Britain's initiative to create a dissident government, replacing the current collaborative Bordeaux government. Great Britain wanted to keep France in the war at all costs, even if they had to overrule French sovereignty to do it. This is also seen in Churchill's direct appeals to the French people on the BBC.<sup>17</sup> Before the British government conceptualized their plan, Jean Monnet and the French Ambassador Charles Corbin had detailed the realities of creating a dissident government that the French could trust. They had set forth the following central concerns on 16 June: the members of the government would need to be well-known Frenchmen and the government would have to be independent of Great Britain.<sup>18</sup> At the time, there were no French politicians in London besides de Gaulle, and Churchill hoped that more disillusioned French officials would leave Bordeaux and become allies of Great Britain. Reports of continued resistance in the French colonies increased this hope.<sup>19</sup> If French politicians left Bordeaux, they could establish *LFL* in a French colony and remain independent of Great Britain. The first step of Churchill's policy depended on French politicians leaving Bordeaux, becoming allies of Great Britain, and creating a dissident government.

Although Churchill would not get his wish, Charles de Gaulle proved his distaste for the defeatists and his desire to keep fighting in "L'Appeal" on 18 June, which attracted significant attention. The speech contained only three hundred words yet marked the beginning of de Gaulle's political popularity. In "L'Appeal," de Gaulle principally addressed reasons why France ought to fight for her freedom. France still had a vast empire, a strong fleet, and a large quantity of gold that she could use to fight the Germans.<sup>20</sup> She had not exhausted her resources and was more than able to continue fighting. De Gaulle also showed that, although the battle for France was lost, she could still participate in the world war with allies such as Great Britain and United States:

There remain to us allies whose resources are immense and who dominate the seas. There remain to us the gigantic possibilities of American industry. The same conditions of warfare that resulted in our being beaten by 5,000 airplanes and 6,000 tanks could tomorrow give us victory with 20,000 tanks and 20,000 airplanes.<sup>21</sup>

Because of these reasons, de Gaulle showed that the Bordeaux government had no reasonable cause to surrender. De Gaulle declared that the Bordeaux government was illegitimate and that he was the true representative of France. It was his first interaction with the French en masse and earned him the reputation of the "First Resistor."<sup>22</sup> De Gaulle's speech exhibited his confidence in Nazi Germany's future demise. He purposed to ask of his countrymen, "If the forces of liberty triumph in the end over those of slavery, what would be the destiny of a France that submitted to the enemy?"<sup>23</sup> The content of de Gaulle's "L'Appeal" revealed his great faith in the French and his abhorrence of the Bordeaux government, and the international spotlight illuminated these sentiments.

Charles de Gaulle's "L'Appeal" made him into the image of an undefeated France working in London to defend his country's honor. The French colonies responded to his appeal by sending a message to London "stressing their loyalty and making it clear that feeling in the French colonies is strongly in favor of continuing the war."<sup>24</sup> London received such messages from French colonies in West Africa and Shanghai. In particular, the

French consulate in Shanghai asked London to use their resources in order to fight Nazi Germany.<sup>25</sup> De Gaulle's appeal to Frenchmen also reached the ears of citizens in France, and they identified with the revolutionary junior-officer who embodied an undefeated France.<sup>26</sup> Lord Selwyn-Lloyd, a British representative still in Bordeaux, reported on 22 June that "he had been told by many French officers that they had heard only through General de Gaulle's previous broadcast of the opportunity offered to them to continue resistance on the side of Great Britain."<sup>27</sup> Charles de Gaulle's "L'Appeal" rallied his fellow countrymen to continue fighting and increased his notoriety.

Since de Gaulle was able to stir the French to fight, Churchill recognized his potential to lead *LFL*. De Gaulle's persistence and success in drawing Frenchmen to his cause so impressed Churchill that he became de Gaulle's main supporter before the Foreign Office. Churchill promoted de Gaulle's innovative methods to counter German attacks and his passionate denouncement of the defeatism and pacifism in Pétain's government.<sup>28</sup> De Gaulle's courage to risk his life for the honor of France recommended him for the position that Churchill needed to fill. As writer Andrew Shennan describes, "L'Appeal" was de Gaulle's introduction into politics and set the tone for the rest of his career:

It came to define the political identity that he was to assume in the war years, and indeed, that he retained for the rest of his life—the identity of a solitary leader, who achieves greatness through a combination of his own strength of character, the failure of others, and the supreme distress of his country.<sup>29</sup>

With his winsome speech, de Gaulle distinguished himself as the leader of *LFL* and all fighting Frenchmen.

De Gaulle next drew the support of the British people, as seen in a series of articles from *The Times* and *The New York Times*, and their support strengthened de Gaulle's candidacy to lead *LFL*. On 7 June 1940, *The Times* described de Gaulle in vague, contradictory terms.<sup>30</sup> At this time, de Gaulle was an unknown military officer, and the British had a positive opinion of the war, viewing France as a friend and ally. Within sixteen days, however, the British changed their tone towards France, as seen in *The New York Times* on 23 June 1940: "[Churchill] indicated they would transform France into an active enemy, and he too urged Frenchmen everywhere to resist Germany."<sup>31</sup> The British applauded de Gaulle's efforts, publishing in *The Times* on 16 September 1940: "It is because General de Gaulle has the capacity to concentrate upon essentials that one day, as the Prime Minister has said, he and his men will have an honoured place in history."<sup>32</sup> The British people's resolute support of Charles de Gaulle originated from their desire to have an ally against Nazi Germany.

Winston Churchill used the support of the British people to back his recommendation of de Gaulle to the Foreign Office. Churchill echoed the British people on 23 June, claiming, "General de Gaulle was a good fighting soldier, with a good reputation and a strong personality who might well be the right man to set up such a Council."<sup>33</sup> R. L. Speaight's support of de Gaulle on 1 July before the Foreign Office reflected the influence of the British people's support:

General de Gaulle stands as the undisputed leader of the no-surrender government, but no influential names are as yet associated with him... In these circumstances there is at present no question of His Majesty's Government giving official recognition to the National Committee or any other such body as a rival government to that of Marshal Pétain . . . we are collaborating openly and closely with General de Gaulle.<sup>34</sup>

With such a public endorsement for his leadership, de Gaulle benefited from Churchill's influence among ministers of Parliament.

Despite the support of the British people and the recommendation of Churchill, the majority of the Foreign Office, led by General Sir John Dill, did not support de Gaulle as the leader of *LFL*. When de Gaulle arrived from France, the Foreign Office fiercely opposed de Gaulle and "L'Appeal," which almost did not air. Early reports in June from France assured the Foreign Office that French politicians would establish a dissident government in the colonies before succumbing to surrender, making de Gaulle's candidacy unnecessary. In consequence, the Foreign Office chose to disassociate with de Gaulle. General Dill was the main voice of opposition to de Gaulle's appointment, for he despised the French military performance against Nazi Germany and distrusted further French participation in the war. If a qualified French leader came forth, however, General Dill would consider creating *LFL* without de Gaulle and keep France as an ally.<sup>35</sup> Even when the Bordeaux government capitulated on 22 June, the Foreign Office refused to partner with de Gaulle and instead established the Committee on French Resistance. De Gaulle attempted to renew relations with the Foreign Office by requesting a minor position on 23 June. He asked to lead a French National Committee that would help form the dissident government that Churchill desired. This pleased General Dill and the Foreign Office, for de Gaulle would not be the leader of *LFL*.<sup>36</sup> The Foreign Office accepted de Gaulle's proposal in principle, for just as in Churchill's "policy of confrontation," everything hinged on French politicians leaving the Bordeaux

government.

The absence of French politicians from the Bordeaux government left Charles de Gaulle as the Foreign Office's only option to lead *LFL*. Shortly after Pétain signed the treaty, a group of French politicians left Bordeaux on the *Masillia* in protest. The Foreign Office recognized that the politicians aboard the *Masillia* were perfect candidates to lead *LFL*. On 24 June, the Foreign Office sent Minister of Information Alfred Duff Cooper and former commander of the British Expeditionary Force in France General John Gort to meet the politicians at a port in French Morocco. General Charles Noguès, however, oversaw the port and sympathized with Pétain. When the British representatives tried to land on 25 June, General Noguès closed all of the airstrips, forcing them to land on the water. General Noguès prohibited communication between the French politicians and the British representatives, and after two days of close surveillance, Duff Cooper and General Gort were ordered out of Morocco. By 28 June, the Foreign Office's hope of an independent dissident government of French politicians in North Africa ended. The British Foreign Policy Records describe the full impact of this moment:

On June 28 it was clear, from French sources, that there was no chance of winning over General Noguès. Naval opinion at Casablanca and Rabat was hostile to Great Britain and opinion in the Air Force was also hostile. The Admiral at Casablanca had said that he would fire on any British ships trying to enter the port.<sup>37</sup>

Churchill chose this moment of despair and confusion to promote Charles de Gaulle's candidacy one last time. In preparation for this moment, de Gaulle outlined a proposal for *LFL*. As the leader, de Gaulle would recruit a volunteer French legion, form a French armament organization, control French warships in England, and form an intelligence and propaganda service.<sup>38</sup> Though the Committee on French Resistance did not approve of this plan, de Gaulle was the only Frenchman offering to work with Great Britain to continue fighting the war. Therefore, on 28 June 1940, the British government gave the following statement: "His Majesty's Government recognise General de Gaulle as the leader of all free Frenchmen, wherever they may be, who rally to him in support of the Allied cause."<sup>39</sup> The absence of French leadership necessitated the appointment of General de Gaulle as the leader of *LFL*.

Churchill next suggested Operation Susan to ensure the appearance of an independent, French dissident government under Charles de Gaulle. If *LFL* was stationed in a French colony, the French Empire could unite around an independent front against Nazi Germany. This came on the recommendation of Charles Corbin, French ambassador to Great Britain, who said, "If we wanted an organization to serve as a nucleus of resistance, this organization must have the appearance of an independent body. Otherwise even those in France with friendly feelings towards Great Britain would have nothing to do with it."<sup>40</sup> In Operation Susan, Churchill proposed to invade French Morocco on 2 July and depose General Nèques and other Pétain sympathizers. Then, the British forces would establish a British-supported French government on French soil. De Gaulle's role in Operation Susan would be to establish an administration, control the French fleet, and recruit French forces to his cause. Churchill's recommendation, however, fell on deaf ears in the Foreign Office.<sup>41</sup> The Foreign Office argued that the plan was not militarily sound and refused Operation Susan. Despite its swift end, the proposal demonstrated Churchill's determination to establish de Gaulle as leader of *LFL*, for as described by historian Martin Mickelson:

Operation Susan reflected Churchill's determination, if not rashness, to strike at the marshal's control over the French fleet and empire. He had tried vainly to create a dissident French government that would rally both to Britain's side. Finding no other alternative, Churchill instead turned to de Gaulle, who alone had declared himself ready to continue the war.<sup>42</sup>

Though Operation Susan failed to launch, it did reveal Churchill's intentions to establish de Gaulle in a representative French government independent of British support.

In his last step for the "policy of confrontation," Churchill designed Operation Catapult to eliminate the possibility of the Nazis using the French fleet against Great Britain, which was his chief concern. When the French first signed the treaty with Hitler, the British government hoped that the French would send their fleet and arms to the British rather than give it to the Nazis.<sup>43</sup> The British even promised to release the French from their former agreement of 28 March, which prohibited a separate peace with Nazi Germany, so long as the French sent their fleet to British harbors.<sup>44</sup> But the French did not send their fleet to Britain following the treaty. The terms of the treaty showed that the Nazis planned to use the fleet, but the Foreign Office received conflicting messages from French navy officers. For instance, the Foreign Office received encouraging messages from Admiral Darlan that the French fleet harbored in North Africa would not be used against Great Britain:

Admiral Darlan had telegraphed in the afternoon of June 24 that France had accepted the dispositions of the armistice on condition that the French fleet must definitely remain French, under the French flag, and with a reduced French complement. Admiral Darlan thought that these dispositions were not in any way contrary to British interests.<sup>45</sup>

Despite Darlan's assurances, Churchill did not want to risk the use of the French fleet against the British, which would be detrimental. On 3 July, the Foreign Office approved Operation Catapult, and the British thus attacked the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir in French Algeria. The ships suffered little damage, but the British inflicted roughly 1,300 casualties on the French forces.<sup>46</sup> Because of Catapult, the French fleet no longer threatened Great Britain's security.

While Catapult success assured British authorities that the French could not attack their former ally, the repercussions of the attack at Mers-el-Kébir drastically hindered de Gaulle's agenda to garner French support, showing that Great Britain's priority was Great Britain. The attacks created a strong Anglophobic resentment and distrust among French naval forces. The number of Pétain sympathizers increased greatly after the attack.<sup>47</sup> The attack also so riled de Gaulle that he contemplated abandoning *LFL*, cutting ties with Great Britain, and retiring to Canada.<sup>48</sup> Because Churchill had excluded him from the planning sessions for Catapult, de Gaulle realized that Great Britain would defend her interests before those of France. After contemplation, however, de Gaulle saw the greater importance of his work in London and decided to stay. He made a speech on 8 July to renew his commitment to work with Great Britain in order to save the honor of France, but he also expressed his grief and anger over the destruction caused by Catapult. At the end of the speech, de Gaulle reminded his countrymen that France's salvation was linked to a British victory:

No Frenchman worthy of the name can for a moment doubt that a British defeat would seal forever his country's bondage. Come what may, even if for a time one of them is bowed under the yoke of the common foe, our two peoples—our two great peoples—are still linked together. Either they will both succumb, or they will triumph side by side.<sup>49</sup>

In this statement, de Gaulle linked British interests with French interests in order to justify his choice to stand with Great Britain against Nazi Germany. Catapult revealed Great Britain's true intent to uphold its interests before those of de Gaulle and *LFL*, but de Gaulle used it to refocus his intentions to save the honor of France.

### 3. Conclusion

Despite his earnest work as France's wartime leader and as France's first president of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle remains one of the most controversial and beloved political figures in French history, second only to Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>50</sup> He is the father of modern day France, yet in June 1940, de Gaulle's appointment as the leader of *LFL* was only one part of Churchill's "policy of confrontation." With little initial experience in the game of politics, de Gaulle filled a vacant role as the Foreign Office's last choice to lead free Frenchmen. De Gaulle's battle with the British government began at his appointment, for *LFL* was wholly reliant on British support for political, economic, and military power throughout World War II. Yet de Gaulle benefited from the support of the British people and Winston Churchill in his first month of power, and for the duration of World War II, de Gaulle emphasized his singularity as a consistent, fighting French leader when other politicians vied for his position. Although de Gaulle appeared to be a pawn for the Foreign Office against the Bordeaux government in June 1940, he capitalized on the power presented to him and established himself as the only worthy man to lead the French in the war.

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