

# H-Net Reviews

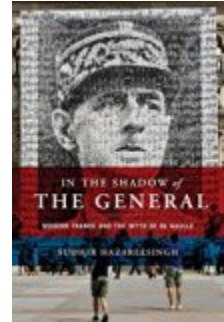
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sudhir Hazareesingh. *In the Shadow of the General: Modern France and the Myth of De Gaulle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 256 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-530888-4.

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Published on H-War (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



## Waddell on Hazareesingh

Mindscaping is a risky practice; too often the shores are well limned, but the intervening shoals sparsely charted. Unfortunately, to access a political culture this craft is unavoidable. Thankfully Sudhir Hazareesingh's *In the Shadow of the General* adroitly avoids the worst pitfalls of this looser genre of historical narrative and in doing so provides us with vibrant walk into the mythopoeitic realm of Charles de Gaulle's France, festooned everywhere with the shifting reminiscences of the enigmatic General.

Hazareesingh is a university lecturer and tutorial fellow in politics at Balliol College. As of 2006 he is also an elected fellow of the British Academy and has published extensively on modern French politics.

Of course this book does not treat much with de Gaulle himself; it is not a biography in any sense. Rather, as the title states, it deals with the broad penumbra of emotions, perspectives, and national identity left behind him. To this end Hazareesingh draws on a wide archival network, most notably a vast storehouse of recently made available letters sent to de Gaulle from the public. Much of this is quite revealing of popular sentiment attached to de Gaulle especially as the man of the 18th of June, the war leader and savior of the French national consciousness. Nevertheless, it is difficult to gauge how thoroughly this can truly capture the "French collective imagination" (p. 7). Work in memory necessarily defies statistical analysis. Like other such endeavors, Hazareesingh's ably traverses political ceremonies, monument building,

and the cultic nature of visitation to de Gaulle's home in Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises.

Whatever imprecision inheres in Hazareesingh's book does not detract from the firm case to be made for de Gaulle's mythos as an essential, if not *the* essential, factor in modern French political culture. Hazareesingh persuasively argues for the General's broad-thinking nationalism as that which saved the French Right, reordering it in a way that was both innovative, and yet conservative. More surprising and insightful is Hazareesingh's analysis of more recent French literature in demonstrating how de Gaulle was eventually appropriated by the Left as well. Hazareesingh convinces us that the General did, after all, transcend the political mire of party politics and has come to occupy a truly unique place in French history. Pleasantly, Hazareesingh accomplishes this with the same sort of pseudo-religious tenor and imagery evocative of the General's own personality and writing.

Perhaps Hazareesingh's most interesting chapter is his discussion of de Gaulle's *War Memoirs*. Though different in flavor from the rest of the book, the discussion of the rhetorical skill of de Gaulle and the lofty self-image he crafted in his writing is indeed illustrative of what would become de Gaulle's republicanism. Hazareesingh's understanding of de Gaulle as the "heir to a range of political traditions but not tied down to any single one" (p. 49), a beneficent mix of "royalist sentiment and republican reason" is quite useful (p. 162). It is at least an ad-

equate framework in which to parse the often ambiguous statements and actions of the General. Similarly, the participation of de Gaulle in history and the writing of it matched with his studied “distanciation” from the furniture of the story once again moves us in the direction of a view of de Gaulle as a secular-religious figure hovering Christ-like between the immanent and the transcendent.

One wishes, however, that Hazareesingh had dealt more with de Gaulle beyond the métropole. His treatment of the General’s influence in the former colonies and the latter French Union is all but lacking. For the man who presided over the dissolution of the French empire and given the growing historiographical trend to evaluate the Hexagone in relation to the colonies, this gap needs to be more adequately filled. This is all the more important as de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic and his own second messianic run at the helm of the French state were born in Algiers and both nearly died there. Hazareesingh could have profitably engaged in some analysis of the process by which de Gaulle became everything to everyone in Algeria during the final harrowing years of the Fourth Republic and by dint of reputation alone navigated France past the political turmoil of the 1960s. Still,

given the archival hurdles involved, this is less a criticism than hope for another book. Similarly, it would have been useful to engage a deeper reading of how the memory of de Gaulle’s controversial efforts to strike out alone in foreign policy, apart from British or American interests, continues to shape French policy today.

Lastly, this is not a book for the uninitiated. The French specialist who has perused the shelves dedicated to de Gaulle will find much here; the novice will be confused. The book is only loosely chronological, with each chapter examining a particular Gaullian motif after the fashion of a literary study. This is also not a work that discusses de Gaulle as a war leader. The importance of the 18th of June speech is naturally asserted, but is not examined within its particular context. That is not Hazareesingh’s purpose. Anyone looking for an analysis of de Gaulle as a strategic thinker should look elsewhere. It is nonetheless an important work, the more so for an Anglophone audience. There is no real analogue to Charles de Gaulle in either the British or American political tradition. Modern France, which so frequently baffles Anglo-American observers, needs to be understood in the shadow of the General.

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**Citation:** William Waddell. Review of Hazareesingh, Sudhir, *In the Shadow of the General: Modern France and the Myth of De Gaulle*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

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