Churchill and France during the Second World War: 'NEVER WILL I BELIEVE THAT THE SOUL OF FRANCE IS DEAD.'

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In 1932 Adolf Hitler had an opportunity to meet Churchill when they were both in Munich, but decided against it. One of the reasons he gave to Putzi Hanfstaengel, who tried to arrange the meeting, was that: 'They say your Mr. Churchill is a rabid Francophile.'[1] Churchill might have dissented from the 'rabid,' which put Francophilia in the category of a dangerous and contagious disease; but not from the general proposition. He frequently declared his long-standing affection for France. In October 1940 he broadcast to the French people, and told them that 'For more than thirty years in peace and war I have marched with you, and am marching still along the same road.'[2] Speaking in France in 1946, he said: 'Using my privilege as your old and faithful friend…'[3] (He went on, as old and faithful friends sometimes do, to offer some wise but unpalatable advice!)

What did it mean for Churchill to declare his friendship for France, and to proclaim his belief in 'the soul of France,' as in the phrase quoted in my title? One of Churchill's French biographers, Jacques Chastenet wrote that Frenchmen often asked, 'Does Churchill love France?,' and gave his own answer. Chastenet observed that Churchill certainly loved French wine, and the sunshine of the Cote d'Azur, and he readily asserted that he was an old friend of France; 'but,' Chastenet went on, 'but France has only ever been for him an instrument … a strong France appeared to him an indispensable shield for England.' There, for this hardheaded, worldly-wise Frenchman, lay the heart of the matter – though, because he was worldly-wise and a Frenchman, he concluded sympathetically: 'What patriot, after all, is going to complain about that?'[4]

We see here two approaches to politics and statecraft: the emotional and romantic on the one hand, regarding nations as having souls; and the calculating and Machiavellian on the other, seeing nations as having interest which their rules must pursue. No one would deny that Churchill had a strong streak of both in his make-up; and an examination of his dealings with France during the Second World War provides a good opportunity to assess these two aspects of his personality and statesmanship.

First, I must make some observations about **Churchill and France in general,** without which his relations with France during the war cannot be properly understood.

In any story, it is a good rule to start at the beginning; but on this occasion we may start a little before the beginning of Churchill's own lifetime. His parents (Lord Randolph and Jennie Jerome – who was of course American) were married at the British Embassy church in Paris, which was obviously a good omen for Francophilia among their children. On the other hand, when Winston visited France at the age of 17, he did so only with deep reluctance and after prolonged resistance. He went (was sent would be more accurate) on the insistence of the Head Master of Harrow School, in order to improve his French by a stay with a family at Versailles. The young Winston wrote to his mother that: 'The food is

very queer, but there is plenty, & on the whole it is good.' He also wrote (in French): 'C'est une nation bien militaire' (This is indeed a military nation) – a phrase which conveyed a strong sense of approval, and showed that his French was by no means bad.[5]

Later in life, Churchill grew very fond of French landscapes as subjects for his paintings; he was a frequent visitor to the country, and felt very much at home there – precisely the sort of attachment to French sunshine and wine that Chastenet refers to, and which can be merely superficial. But there was more to Churchill than that. He was deeply versed in French history, of the romantic and military kind which appealed to him. His description of Joan of Arc in his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* could not be improved upon by even the most ardent Frenchman. 'There now appeared on the ravaged scene an Angel of Deliverance, the noblest patriot of France, the most splendid of her heroes, the most beloved of her saints, the most inspiring of all her memories … the ever-shining, ever-glorious Joan of Arc.' (And he added, with that touch of deflation which he could often apply as a counter-point to the rhetoric – 'If this was not a miracle, it ought to be.'[6] Another French hero received very different treatment. In his biography of his great ancestor, the Duke of Marlborough, Churchill offered this description of Louis XIV. 'No worse enemy of human freedom has ever appeared in the trappings of polite civilization. Insatiable appetite, cold, calculating ruthlessness, monumental conceit, presented themselves armed with fire and sword. The veneer of culture and good manners … only adds a heightening effect to the villainy of his life's story.'[7] Churchill has not left us (as far as I know) a portrait of that other French hero, Napoleon; but frequent scattered references show that he admired the brilliance of Napoleon's military genius but deplored his insatiable appetite for power and the terrible losses which his wars inflicted upon the French people – which is a nicely balanced judgment, well this side of the idolatry which Napoleon often attracts.[8]

Partly form his study of history, and partly from personal contacts, Churchill formed a deep admiration for the French Army. He visited the French line during the Great War of 1914-18, both while he was a minister and during the period when he commanded a battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers at the front – surely the most unusual battalion commander that regiment has ever known. He was favourably impressed by what he saw among the French soldiers. In the 1930s he observed French military manoeuvres in company with the French Chief of Staff, and wrote: 'The officers of the French Army are impressive by their gravity and competence. One feels the strength of the nation resides in its army.'[9] He shocked the House of Commons (then much devoted to the cause of disarmament) in March 1993 by declaring emphatically: 'Thank God for the French Army!'[10] Indeed, Churchill maintained his faith in the fighting qualities of the French Army and the talents of its leaders beyond the time when that faith was justified by the facts; but as one of his most trusted counselors, Desmond Morton, found out on occasion, there was no point in trying to shake his beliefs – 'he just would have none of it.'[11]

Churchill also moved easily among French politicians of different political persuasions: Daladier, Herriot, Flandin in the centre; Reynaud and Mandel on the right; and – perhaps surprisingly – the gentle, intellectual socialist leader, Leon Blum on the left. In July 1938, when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth went on a state visit to France, the French government invited Churchill as a special guest, though he held no office and was indeed in the wilderness in British politics. It was a mark of high esteem and a tribute to his standing among French politicians.

While dealing with Churchill and France, we cannot avoid (indeed, who would wish to avoid?) his use of the French language. His first school report, when he was only eight years old, summed up his term's work in French, thus: 'Knows a few sentences, but knowledge of grammar is very slight.'[12] There may be those who would say that this barbed comment remained largely true for the rest of his life. Churchill himself liked to make jokes about his French. In November 1958, when General de Gaulle conferred on him the Cross of Liberation, Churchill replied in English, observing: 'I have often made speeches in French, but that was wartime, and I do not wish to subject you to the ordeals of darker days.' It was true that Churchill's command of the language could be erratic, but he could also use it to excellent effect. In October 1940 he made a broadcast to the French people, in carefully rehearsed French, which made a lasting impression of its hearers. There are many examples of him using a telling and precise phrase – 'Je cherche la France que j'aime' (I am seeking the France which I love) he said in April 1944 to a member of de Gaulle's National Committee, who fully understood both the words and the emotion behind them.[14] If Churchill liked to treat his French humorously, we can enjoy the joke with him; but we must remember that he could use the language seriously and to good effect.

Churchill's affection for France, his feeling for its history, his admiration for its Army, and his close relations with French politicians – all are plain to see. The events of the Second World War subjected these bonds to two very severe strains: first, the fall of France in 1940; and next, prolonged exposure to the difficult and angular personality of General de Gaulle.

The collapse of France in 1940 remains, even after nearly sixty years, an astonishing event. The great French Army in which Churchill put his trust was utterly defeated in about four weeks. The Third French Republic who politicians he knew so well, broke down, and was replaced by a new regime headed by Marshal Petain which accepted the German victory – something that Churchill resolutely refused to do. These events presented Churchill with a challenge to some of his deepest personal, political and strategic assumptions. He responded with an extraordinary mixture of sympathy and ruthlessness.

Churchill's sympathy towards France in this terrible disaster was heartfelt, and led him further in both words and actions than most of his colleagues wished to go, and sometimes further than sound judgment should have permitted. Let us take some examples. During the evacuation from Dunkirk (where large French and British forces were cut off in northeastern France by the German attack) it turned out that by midnight on 30/31 May, 135,000 British troops had been taken off in four days, but not a single Frenchman. At a meeting with French leaders the next day, Churchill, stirred by deep emotion, declared that henceforth the evacuation must go forward on equal terms; and astonishingly this was achieved. Over the next four days the numbers brought off were almost exactly equal, at nearly 140,000 for each nationality.

During the whole period of the battle of France, the French appealed repeatedly for British help, and especially for the dispatch of fighter squadrons to contest the German command of the air. In the British response to these appeals, Churchill played a vital and individual part. The pattern of events went something like this. The French asked for a lot – on one occasion ten fighter squadrons. The War Cabinet and the Air Staff, conscious of the needs of home defense, were willing to send four squadrons. Churchill weighed in on the French side, and the War Cabinet compromised by agreeing that the extra six squadrons should

operate over France from bases in England. On three separate occasions the British sent fewer aircraft than the French requested, but more than the Air Staff thought wise; and the difference arose from Churchill's advocacy. On land, the British made a desperate effort to send a new force to France to take part in the last stage of the battle after the evacuation from Dunkirk, not for any physical military purpose, but purely as a symbol of British support for France. Again, this was Churchill's doing; and finally, only a personal telephone call from the commander in the field, saying bluntly that the operation was both pointless and dangerous, persuaded the Prime Minister to change his mind.

This persistence in helping the French was dangerous to British air defense and to the small remnant of the field army, and Churchill was lucky to avoid disaster. Why did he do it? The answer was two-fold, and involved both calculation and emotion. There was a strong political and strategic argument that Britain must keep France in the war, even after defeat at home, to save the French fleet and Empire; and that this objective was worth great risks. Churchill also suffered the terrible conviction (he wrote of his grief) that the British had not played their proper part in the battle, throwing all the burden and the losses on the French alone. He wrote to Eden (then Minister for War) on 6 June that in the first year of the previous war (1914-15) the British had put 47 divisions into action; in the first nine months of this war they had managed only ten. In the face of this grievous failure, they must at least do everything they could. Of these two motives, it seems to me that emotion weighed at least as heavily as calculation with Churchill – perhaps more so.

Let us turn to an even more dramatic episode of that eventful summer. On 16 June, when the French government was on the verge of asking for an armistice, the British War Cabinet proposed the astonishing step of creating an immediate union between the two countries – 'one Franco-British Union' were the words used. Churchill later played down both the significance of this proposal and his own part in it, saying that he had been carried away by the enthusiasm of others; but eyewitness accounts show that he too was enthusiastic. It was a remarkable proposal to a country which was not just on the brink of defeat, but well over the edge; and it is highly doubtful whether any Prime Minister except Churchill would have made it. What could possibly have come of it we can only wonder. It was the politics of theatre.

The offer of union fell flat, and that very night a new French government under Petain asked for an armistice. On 17 June Churchill broadcast to the British people, without a word of reproof or recrimination against France. 'The news from France is very bad,' he began, 'and I grieve for the gallant French people who have fallen into this terrible misfortune. Nothing will alter our feelings towards them, or our faith that the genius of France will rise again.'[15] (Such evidence as we have of public opinion at the time shows that the British people did not fully share this generosity; Churchill was usually more Francophile than most of his fellow-countrymen.) Four months later, Churchill broadcast to the French people, repeating the prayer round the old French coin the *louis d'or*, 'May God protect France,' and telling his listeners 'Never will I believe that the soul of France is dead.'[16] We should mark these phrases – 'the genius of France' and 'the soul of France' – which encapsulate the idea (the heart of the romantic conception of nationalism and the nation) that there was somewhere a true France, not necessarily represented by the actual France then in existence, defeated and under German occupation. Churchill thus showed ample sympathy for France in the crisis of 1940. His ruthlessness was shorter and sharper. He believed in the soul of France, but

meanwhile the bodily safety of Great Britain had to be ensured. When France surrendered, and the armistice terms laid down that most French warships were to be disarmed imports under German occupation, and thus open to German capture, Churchill did not hesitate. The British seized all French warships which had taken refuge in British ports, and (much more drastically) attacked a strong French squadron at Mers-el-Kebir in North Africa, though only after offering the choice of fighting on against the Germans. Over 1,200 French sailors were killed in bombardment lasting just over ten minutes – a terrible casualty rate. The British also attacked a French battleship at Dakar, and detained a French squadron in harbour at Alexandria.

During the battle of France, it may well be that Churchill went too far in sending help to the French at the risk of home defense. At Mers-el-Kebir, British as well as French historians, have often reproved him for being too hasty and too ruthless *against* the French. Churchill was not given to half-measures. Be loyal to your friends, and never maltreat your enemies by halves, were among his sayings. In 1940 France received the benefit of the first, and suffered the transferred consequences of the second – the French fleet was not an enemy, but might fall into the enemy's hands.

Let me now turn to the second of the trials to which Churchill's affection for France was subjected during the Second World War, and look at the troubled relations between **Churchill and de Gaulle.**

It was actually not Churchill, but Sir Edward Spears who used the well-known phrase that the heaviest cross he had to bear was the Cross of Lorraine – the emblem of General de Gaulle's Free French movement.[17] But though Churchill did not say it, he must surely have thought it. Why then did Churchill take up that particular cross; why did he find it so burdensome; and why did he continue to bear it?

Churchill gave de Gaulle his start in June 1940, welcoming him to London, and by his personal intervention, permitting him to make the broadcast on 18 June that later became famous and laid the foundation of de Gaulle's subsequent reputation, and in which he launched the word 'resistance' on its long and resonant course. At the time no one (not even de Gaulle himself) anticipated that the General would become the leader and the embodiment of the French movement to continue the war. Other and better-known French leaders were expected to come to London, but they never arrived. In the event, Churchill found himself with de Gaulle almost by accident, because there was no one else.

But very quickly there came to be more to it than that. Churchill (as we have just seen) affirmed his faith in the genius and the soul of France, but under the surface he was badly shaken by the catastrophic events of 1940. At the end of June that year, thinking aloud about the French defeat, he said to a group of friends that 'there had been a rot in France which had affected every class and stratum of the community: it was not merely the Generals and the politicians but the whole country.'[18] Nearly a year later, at a small lunch party, someone mentioned the Legion of Honour, the much-treasured French decoration, and Churchill exclaimed: ' "Legion of Honour? They have the ribbon today and the enamel cross. But where is the honour? Gone! Gone! – and then a wide despairing gesture – GONE!' "[19] These somber and dispirited sentiments were far removed from Churchill's usual faith in France, and he looked desperately for something or someone to offer hope of

recovery. It was therefore, with particular emphasis and significance that Churchill wrote, that when de Gaulle came to England in 1940 he 'carried with him … the honour of France.'[20] And it was a happy omen that de Gaulle took as the watchword of the Free French *'Honneur et Patrie.'* As long as de Gaulle kept to that motto, and sustained the honour of France, Churchill was unlikely to abandon him – though he came close to it on occasion.

He came close to a breach with de Gaulle because their relations proved intensely difficult, and their quarrels highly explosive. Why was this? Partly it was a matter of the collision of two powerful and egotistical personalities. Both were prone to anger, though de Gaulle's outbursts were often calculated, while Churchill's fits of temper could cool quickly and he would swing to the other extreme, vowing that he would never forget that de Gaulle had stood by him in 1940. Churchill was often dismayed by de Gaulle's arrogant and arbitrary behaviour which impeded the conduct of a complicated war. de Gaulle on the other hand was acutely conscious of the weakness of his position as an exile, literally in the pay of the British, and he therefore, set out to display the most intransigent independence, whatever the cost. Relations between these two sensitive and thin-skinned giants were almost certain to be difficult.

Behind these personal elements lay a political problem of the first magnitude, which we may call for short the 'Roosevelt factor.' By the end of 1942 Roosevelt had conceived a fixed antipathy towards de Gaulle, for reasons which are still not entirely clear. Whatever the reasons, the fact of Roosevelt's hostility was a powerful political force; and it was not confined to de Gaulle in person, but extended to France in general and in particular to the French Empire. This hostility on Roosevelt's part placed Churchill in an extremely difficult position. When France was defeated in 1940 he turned to the United States as the only power which could ensure British victory, as distinct from survival. He made the Anglo-American alliance the lynchpin of his wartime strategy and the basis of his hopes for the post-war world; and to build up that alliance he lavished immense care and effort on establishing a personal friendship with Roosevelt. He could not allow that alliance to be shaken, and that friendship imperiled, for the sake of General de Gaulle.

Churchill's relations with de Gaulle were therefore placed under great strain, especially in 1943, when Roosevelt urged him strongly to break with the General. In May and June 1943 Churchill came very near to a breach, writing of eliminating de Gaulle as a political force and cutting off the British supply of money to the Free French. He never quite did so, partly because he was restrained at crucial moments by the War Cabinet, and especially by Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary, and partly for reasons which I will come to in a moment. de Gaulle stayed on, and remained a constant source of friction in the Anglo-American alliance and in Churchill's foreign policy.

There was another difficulty in addition to the Roosevelt factor. de Gaulle's absolute belief was that he alone represented France, and indeed that in some mystical sense he *was* France. Churchill did not accept these claims. In a Secret Session of the House of Commons on 10 December 1942 he said: 'I cannot believe that de Gaulle is France, still less that Darlan and Vichy are France.' (This was at the time of the Anglo-American deal with Darlan, the collaborationist leader, in North Africa.) 'France is something greater, more complex, more formidable than any of these sectional manifestations.' He then went further, explaining his belief that de Gaulle was in a deep sense hostile to Britain. '… the House must not be led

to believe that General de Gaulle is an unfaltering friend of Britain. On the contrary, I think he is one of those good Frenchmen who have a traditional antagonism engrained in French hearts by centuries of war against the English.'[21] Later, in June 1943, Churchill took the highly unusual step of issuing in his own name a formal 'memorandum of guidance' to the British press, stating flatly that 'de Gaulle … cannot be considered as a friend of our country. Whatever he has been, he has left a trail of anglophobia behind him.'[22] Churchill said on occasion that he was afraid that if de Gaulle attained power in France he would use it in ways damaging to Britain – a prophecy which proved to have some truth in it.

Churchill thus found that his personal relations with de Gaulle were often very difficult; he was exasperated that his relations with Roosevelt were constantly plagued by de Gaulle's intransigence; and he believed that de Gaulle was not a friend of Britain. This added up to a heavy burden, and it is not surprising that he was sometimes sorely tempted to throw it off. Yet he did not do so; and indeed he exerted himself steadily on de Gaulle's behalf. British supplies of money and equipment for the Free French were maintained; British pilots and aircrafts established and kept up de Gaulle's contacts with France and the French resistance. Even in 1943, the worst year for Churchill's relations with de Gaulle, the British government consistently worked to establish a single French Authority to represent all the different French territories and forces engaged in the war on the Allied side; and that authority was the Committee of National Liberation, which (after prolonged internal struggles) was controlled by General de Gaulle. Moreover, in those internal struggles, the British assisted de Gaulle, while the Americans preferred his rival, General Giraud. Much of this activity was undertaken by the Foreign Office and other agencies of the British government, but is was sustained, and sometimes activated, by Churchill himself.

Why was this? Why did Churchill, despite pressure from Roosevelt, provocation from de Gaulle, and many quarrels, ultimately stand by de Gaulle? The answer lies partly in the fact that Churchill was a man of contradictions – he could fervently believe one thing about de Gaulle at one time, and something quite different at another. But it lies also in a combination of personal instinct and political calculation. In personal terms, Churchill returned repeatedly to the simple fact that de Gaulle had stood by Britain in the dark days of 1940, and had thus earned a debt of loyalty. (Churchill did not easily let go in such matters – in other contexts, he stood by his friendships with Lloyd George and Edward Spears long after they had ceased to be politically compatible or useful.) Churchill once told de Gaulle, in the dark days, that they would one day walk down the Champs Elysees together – and they did, on 11 November 1944, amid scenes of remarkable enthusiasm. Strikingly, de Gaulle made his own graceful gesture that day, prevailing on someone to find a bust of the great Duke of Marlborough to display in the French Ministry of War so that Churchill could see it.

Along with personal loyalty went long-term political calculation. Churchill was convinced that when the war was over France must be restored as a great power, for reasons of British self-interest. Britain needed France to help to keep down the Germans, and perhaps also as a support against the Soviet Union. (We must remember that it was generally assumed that the United States would not keep its forces long in Europe after victory was won.) Moreover, Churchill was well aware of Roosevelt's anti-imperial sentiments, and he valued the French Empire as a first line of defense for the British Empire – against the Americans. As time went by between 1942 and 1944 it became increasingly clear that only de Gaulle

could provide a France sufficiently strong and determined to meet these requirements. Churchill might say in 1944 that he was searching for the France that he loved and despairing of finding it; be he was constrained by the facts to work with the France he had gotten. It was also important that he was subjected to the persistent influence of Anthony Eden, who on a number of occasions kept him on course when his anger against de Gaulle was at its height.

Thus de Gaulle was a burden, but one which Churchill ultimately could not lay down, for both personal and political reasons. Instead, this complicated and difficult relationship became a part of Churchill's lifelong association with France.

It is the purpose of the Kemper Lectures, established here in Westminster College, to encourage reflection on the life and times of Winston Churchill. Within that wide-ranging subject, what has this examination of Churchill and France during the Second World War to tell us? I wish to offer one conclusion, and to leave you with a question.

Throughout this lecture there has run the dual nature of Churchill's statesmanship. He was subject to strong emotions, which could on occasion influence his political and strategic judgment, sometimes to dangerous effect. He was also a man of long-term vision and calculation, based on long political experience and wide historical knowledge. These two aspects went together, in different combinations and shifting proportions. Jacques Chastenet's claim that France was for Churchill simply an instrument for British purposes presents at best only half the story – British policy under Churchill might well have been more straightforward if it had been correct. In fact, Churchill's instincts often pulled against his calculations, as when his sympathy for the stricken France in 1940 conflicted with caution over British home defense, or his anger against de Gaulle threatened the basis of his policy towards France as a whole. Historians have to take Churchill as he was, a Protean figure, sometimes consistent and sometimes erratic. They must also recognize that he worked best when the contrasting aspects of his personality, and his immense talents and energies, were constrained by an ordered system of consultation and decision-making – the sort of system which was provided by the British War Cabinet, the Foreign Office with Eden at its head, and the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Churchill often growled and grumbled at these constraints, but ultimately he nearly always accepted them – which was itself a measure of his greatness.

My question arises from Churchill's custom of referring to 'the genius of France,' or 'the soul of France,' treating the nation as though it were a person, and paying as much attention to the imponderables of national life as to its material elements. This habit was deeply ingrained in his cast of mind, but is I think now largely out of fashion. Statesmen of the present day (and many academics too) are concerned with gross national product and other measurable indices of national strength – usually economic in nature, but sometimes also military, in numbers of armoured divisions, or missile launchers or nuclear submarines. So the question arises: should we regard this part of Churchill's mental make-up as a mere illusion, bred in the age of romantic nationalism, or as an essentially realistic feature of his statesmanship, and thus to be taken seriously in our own day? I leave you to ponder the question; but I offer one comment upon it. However we answer the question, and even if some of us now find Churchill's romantic view of the nation more difficult or illusory, we must recognize that it was part of his view of the world and of history. If we wish to

understand the man, we must seek to come to terms with his cast of mind. It is a pursuit which offers much reward to those who undertake it.

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