

GREAT MAN OR MAD MAN; HERO OR MONSTER? CHARLES DE GAULLE IN BRITISH POLITICAL CARTOONS

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The mixture of attraction and repulsion in the relations between Britain and France that has often been remarked upon can be seen clearly in the figure of Charles de Gaulle who, for the British (and here this can be taken as British cartoonists, politicians, diplomats or the British people as a whole), was a source of both, and often in extreme measures. Moreover it is possible to see de Gaulle, and Britain's relations with and vision of him, as an 'allegory or epitome'¹ of Anglo-French relations as a whole. The impressions and representations of de Gaulle in British cartoons, which are themselves a reflection of the opinions and feelings provoked by de Gaulle, are numerous, often complex, sometimes contradictory: there is sympathy, admiration and respect for his heroism and grandeur, but also ridicule and denigration, and even serious doubts as to his sanity. The cartoons of de Gaulle themselves can often be aggressively clear. His traits, both physical and psychological, are drawn brutally, even cruelly. Yet there is also an inherent ambiguity in them and we can see numerous examples of opposing points of view even within the works of a single cartoonist.

The images of de Gaulle in the British press are certainly numerous, as are the attempts by journalists, politicians and diplomats at the time, and by historians and analysts since, to explain de Gaulle by other means. There are nonetheless certain common themes and clearly identifiable patterns that stand out when an overall view of this corpus is taken. De Gaulle was of

¹ David Dilks, *De Gaulle and the British*, Hull, Hull University Press, 1994, p. 27.

course an obvious godsend for British cartoonists and one of the few French figures which is easily recognisable. In this he can be placed in the same category as such great historical figures as Joan of Arc, Louis XIV or Napoleon, figures that were frequently used in a comparative way to portray de Gaulle. Such comparisons were not only made with de Gaulle's predecessors in France but with his counterparts and contemporaries in Britain, amongst whom there can also be found some whose pictorial representations show comparable signs of madness or greatness, heroism or monstrosity.

In any attempt to interpret the meanings of these depictions of de Gaulle it needs to be recognised that they are by their very nature inexact or imprecise visions of people and events. Indeed such caricatures are in many ways deliberate distortions. Political cartoons deal in exaggerations, both of their subjects' physical traits and their characteristics. When dealing with Anglo-French relations this tendency becomes all the more marked as though when Britain and France come to regard one another there is a deforming lens between them. This difficulty was identified by David Low in his 1945 cartoon where he presents de Gaulle as being fixated by an out-of-date image of an anti-French John Bull while he ignores the 'true' Britain, represented by a solid, down to earth British 'Tommy'.² Twenty years later, at the time of the Anglo-French talks on Britain's demand to enter the Common Market and the incapacity of the two countries' leaders, Macmillan and de Gaulle, to reach an agreement this same message was given by Cummings.

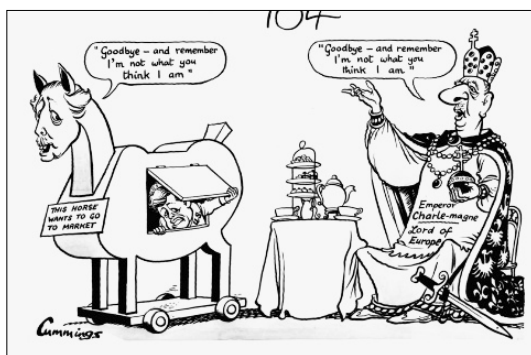


Fig. 1 : Cummings, *Daily Express*, 4 June 1962. British Cartoon Archive, MC1108.

² David Low, *Evening Standard*, 5 June 1945. British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent (BCA), DL2429.

In similar fashion the portrayal of de Gaulle as Dorian Grey by Kenneth Mahood in 1967 puts across the same idea that what we see is not the 'real' de Gaulle.³

De Gaulle's own personality added to these difficulties of interpretation as did his policy of deliberately seeking to keep his adversaries in the dark as to his true intentions. It is, therefore, reasonable to see him in many ways as a masked character or as an actor playing different roles. During the war Winston Churchill complained that de Gaulle was sure 'to play the fool'⁴ and numerous other similar complaints can be found from those who came into contact with him at different stages of his career. British political cartoonists similarly drew on this trait as a source of inspiration for their work. The long list of roles de Gaulle was set to play, or the guises in which he was portrayed, in British cartoons included Churchill, various Kings of England and of France such as Canute, Arthur, Charlemagne, Louis XIV, XV and XVI, and the Kaiser; from amongst Shakespearean characters we can find de Gaulle presented as Julius Caesar, Hamlet, or Kate from *The Taming of the Shrew*. Other intriguing examples of cartoonists' trans-gendering of de Gaulle can be found in the representations of him as Miss France, the Mona Lisa, Isadora Duncan and in various less flattering female roles, for example as an unconvincing fashion model or courtesan. It should, however, be noted that such gender reversals were not applied only to de Gaulle. Macmillan or Wilson were just as likely to be presented as prostitutes selling their favours, usually unsuccessfully, although there appears to have been no such portrayals of Churchill.⁵ Other fictional or mythological guises given to de Gaulle included Cyrano de Bergerac, Mercury, Moses, Heathcliff, James Bond, Charlie Chaplin, Captain Hook, the Beatles, Humpty Dumpty, an over-sized Manneken Pis, the man in the moon and a Dalek.

Across the corpus of British political cartoons we are as likely to see him portrayed as someone else as to see him as himself. This same confusion can also be seen in the reactions and complaints of British politicians and diplomats who had to work with him, and from journalists, political analysts

³ Mahood, *The Times*, 2 August 1967. BCA 11748.

⁴ Quoted in Peter Mangold, *The Almost Impossible Ally. Harold Macmillan and Charles de Gaulle*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2006, p. 51.

⁵ The use of such trans-gendered images in the caricatures of political leaders in Britain and France, and the interpretations that may be drawn from them in analysing Anglo-French relations more broadly, constitutes an extremely interesting area for future research which has yet to be fully exploited.

and later historians, who tried to understand and to explain him. De Gaulle deliberately added to this by muddying the waters, making any clear picture of him all the more difficult to obtain. His adversaries, among whom were his allies, including the British, never ceased to try to get to the heart of his approach but more often than not their efforts ended in failure. All of this added to the mystical, almost mythical, nature of de Gaulle. Writing in 1970 John Newhouse noted his 'mystical sense' of France's 'exalted destiny.' He was, Newhouse wrote, 'a tragic figure, the theater he created, the scenes he played, drew in the others.'⁶ Macmillan noted the 'curious ineptness and rudeness' that resulted from his 'mysticism'.⁷ The journalist Nora Beloff saw him as 'a man who invented his own character.'⁸

It is interesting to note the striking parallels between the images being painted of de Gaulle by the cartoonists and the views being expressed at the same time from other more official sources. It is perhaps not surprising that these cartoons reflect very similar views being expressed by the journalists working in the same papers. What is more so is the close parallels between the cartoonists and what we might broadly term 'officialdom', two milieux that are not normally closely associated, and we might wonder to what extent each had a role in forming, or in reinforcing, the image of the other with regard to de Gaulle. There are certainly many examples of these two apparently separate and very different groups coming up with very similar images of the French leader, albeit in different forms. British diplomats and politicians obviously did not spend their time drawing cartoons but in their reports and memoranda they did paint the same picture, both of de Gaulle personally and of the comparison between him and British leaders. Parallels can be seen in various aspects of the ways in which de Gaulle was portrayed in London.

The most obvious impression that comes from the political cartoons is the way in which they ridicule the French leader. The ambition of political cartoons is rarely, if ever, to seek to flatter and this is even more unlikely when their subject matter is taken from across the Channel. This tendency was facilitated and accentuated by de Gaulle's appearance, which was an open invitation to be even more vitriolic than usual. It was also reinforced by the policies he followed and the manner in which he conducted them.

⁶ John Newhouse, *De Gaulle and the Anglo-Saxons*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1970, p. 29 and p. 352.

⁷ Dilks, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁸ Nora Beloff, *The General Says No*, London, Penguin, 1963, p. 19.

These were a constant source of troubles for his British counterparts, often the subject of confusion or perplexity, frequently hostile to Britain, and only very rarely friendly, and as such it is hardly surprising that both the man and his policies met with little sympathy in Britain. It would, however, be wrong to seek to oversimplify this particular Anglo-French relationship or to see it as an essentially hostile one. Rather we should accept its complexity and its nuances. The ridiculing of de Gaulle is, therefore, simply par for the course. He was a politician and as such he was an easy, and deserving, target for the cartoonists' mockery. His claims to greatness only made this more so, pomposity and arrogance being among the favourite targets of cartoonists. It is uncertain, however, that he was treated with any less reverence than his British or American counterparts.

Another similarity between cartoons and official reports is the way in which they all used historical references in their attempts to describe de Gaulle, especially drawing on comparisons with several great figures from the past. In Whitehall he was seen as a reincarnation of Charlemagne, Napoleon III, and Richelieu while Alexander the Great and Bismarck were reported to be among his heroes.⁹ However, it was the more iconic figures of Joan of Arc, Louis XIV and Napoleon who were the most widely used and it was these that provided cartoonists with the easiest source of material. The figure



Fig. 2 : Vicky, *New Statesman*, 26 April 1958,
British Cartoon Archive, VY1170.

⁹ Rumbold, 23 August 1962 (FO 371 163494); Overton, 24 October 1963 (FO 371 172070); Caccia, 6 May 1963 (FO 371 169124).

of Joan of Arc was a particular favourite and especially useful to all sorts of caricaturists, partly because it was so easily recognised. It also reflected the complexity of de Gaulle's character and the ambiguities in many British evaluations of him.

Joan of Arc could be seen as combining heroic and visionary characteristics but at the same time there were doubts as to her psychological state. Should she be seen as visionary in the sense of being the long-sighted proponent of a clear and strong French national identity, hearing the voices telling her to kick the English out, or should visionary be interpreted as seeing things, hearing voices, the classic symptom of madness? De Gaulle himself was, on occasions, quite willing to talk of himself as a new Joan of Arc. Churchill also saw the similarity adding that he was 'looking for some bishops to burn him.'¹⁰ Was de Gaulle, therefore, playing the part of national saviour, a victim of the treachery of the English and of the betrayal of some on his own side, or an enemy to be eliminated? The same images were given in numerous cartoons.

A second comparison taken from the pages of French history, and one that was equally easily identifiable, was that of Louis XIV. Here again politicians, diplomats and cartoonists all came up with the same image of de Gaulle as a reincarnation, at least in his own mind, of the great sun king.



Fig. 3 : Vicky, *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1958,
British Cartoon Archive, VY1192.

¹⁰ Mangold, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

The two monarchs, one royal the other republican, each embodied the French state. Both were seen as seeking the aggrandizement of France at the expense of other nations, both sought to glorify the great civilising mission of France. To this we can add the comparisons frequently drawn with the great Napoleon whose ambitions, of megalomaniacal proportions, were similarly transferred onto de Gaulle.¹¹

Each of these characterisations opened up de Gaulle to accusations of arrogance and pomposity. Macmillan recorded in his diary for 5 December 1962 that the French leader was ‘a sort of mixture of Louis XIV and Napoleon – certainly in his own estimation. This means that he will be more mystical and remote.’¹² He had already made similar comparisons during his earlier wartime meetings with the General. In these three comparisons, Joan of Arc, Louis XIV and Napoleon, there is already a clear condemnation of the man and of his policies and also a certain accusation of madness that goes beyond the simple and unexceptional ridiculing of a political leader. These undoubtedly unflattering, but also somewhat amusing and for the most part innocent, caricatures of a slightly potty de Gaulle could also veer towards a far more defamatory and aggressive portrayal of him as dictator. British diplomats in particular often condemned his dictatorial behaviour, and Churchill complained of him during the war that he ‘showed many of the symptoms of a budding Fuhrer.’¹³ Various British political cartoonists adopted the same idea representing de Gaulle variously as the Kaiser, as Mussolini, Franco and even Hitler.¹⁴ Not surprisingly this last comparison upset de Gaulle who complained that Macmillan had been behind this although it is very unlikely that a British Prime Minister could possibly have made such a request to a cartoonist, or that a cartoonist should have accepted such an official commission to do the government’s or the Foreign Office’s dirty work for them.

There is in all these British analyses an intriguing use of psycho-analytical tools in the attempts to understand and depict de Gaulle. Churchill’s use of the word ‘symptom’ in his description of de Gaulle is significant. Macmillan, who worked alongside de Gaulle in the wartime years and who

¹¹ Cummings, *Daily Express*, 30 July 1962, BCA 18073.

¹² Harold Macmillan, *At the End of the Day, 1961-63*, London, Macmillan, 1973, p. 338.

¹³ Mangold, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁴ The connection with Franco was made by Osbert Lancaster in his cartoon in the *Daily Express*, 12 November 1970 (BCA 18968). The comparison with Hitler was made by David Low in the *Evening Standard* on 18 April 1947 (BCA DL2719).

was to confront him as Prime Minister fifteen years later, thought de Gaulle ‘almost impossible to deal with’ because of his ‘extreme sensibility’. Despite being ‘so ungracious and so sentimental’, Macmillan wrote, ‘he would immensely like to be liked’, his character was a ‘terrible mixture of inferiority complex and spiritual pride.’ The ‘solution’, Macmillan concluded, ‘could not be dealt with by politicians. They are rather problems for the professional psychiatrist.’¹⁵ During the prolonged diplomatic clash between Britain and France that lasted for almost the whole of de Gaulle’s presidency numerous reports from the Paris embassy reflected on the French leader’s possibly unbalanced state of mind wondering, like Macmillan, whether he ought to seek psychiatric help. This very same image was used at almost exactly the same time by David Low in *The Guardian* in May 1962.

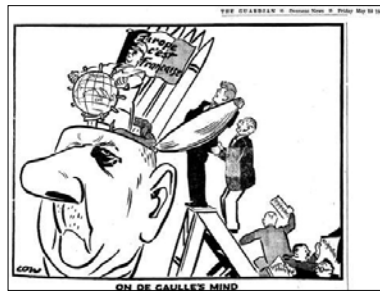


Fig. 4 : David Low, *The Guardian*, 18 May 1962, British Cartoon Archive, LSE9077.

The great variety of comparisons drawn with de Gaulle, fictional or real, contemporary or historical, may be seen as a barely disguised accusation of schizophrenia, although this could also be interpreted as an inability on the part of the British to decipher him. Both cartoonists and officials highlighted what they saw as his split personality, or his multiplicity of personalities, and the difficulty they had to know precisely what costume de Gaulle would put on, which role he would choose to play.¹⁶ The suspicion was that de Gaulle himself did not know what he was playing at, as a result of his own inherent confusion and instability, or that he was deliberately seeking to mislead, to

¹⁵ Mangold, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Cummings, *Daily Express*, 21 May 1958, BCA MC0482; Vicky, *Daily Mirror*, 18 September 1958, BCA VY1280.

hide his real self and his real intentions, that he was in effect play acting. One contemporary observer wondered if de Gaulle was not ‘presenting a spectacle which is pure illusion, that the realities of power have eluded him, and he compensates for this by being a sort of Walter Mitty amongst world statesmen.’¹⁷ Pierson Dixon, who seems to have spent the greater part of his time as British Ambassador in Paris writing reports about de Gaulle’s character, compared him to ‘a comic figure, an Emperor unaware that he is parading without clothes’ who, like Napoleon III, had ‘the same love of play-acting on the world stage’.¹⁸ British cartoonists often took a strikingly similar approach, lining up the different personifications of de Gaulle in front of perplexed onlookers wondering which one the ‘real’ de Gaulle lay behind.



Fig. 5 : Cummings, *Daily Express*, 6 October, 1962, British Cartoon Archive, MC1156.

Their recurrent use of comparisons between de Gaulle and Don Quixote suggests the same emphasis on his mental instability and play acting.¹⁹ Like the officials and politicians, the cartoonists presented him as a mixture of the great and the strange, or as Dixon put it as ‘too odd a kind of great man’.²⁰ The presentation of de Gaulle as the Mad Hatter of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*²¹ reflects perhaps the cartoon equivalent of such ‘diplomatic’ views.

¹⁷ Douglas Johnson, ‘The Political Principles of General de Gaulle’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 41, No.4 (Oct. 1965), p. 652.

¹⁸ Dixon, 7 October 1963 (FO 371 172070), Annual Review 1962 (FO 371 169107).

¹⁹ For example Papas, *The Guardian* 8 August 1963; Illingworth, *Daily Mail*, 2 August 1967; Cummings, 9 June 1969, BCA 04086, ILW4108, 15713.

²⁰ Dixon, 8 April 1963 (PREM 11/4811).

²¹ Garland, 19 February 1969, BCA NG0433.



However, despite these numerous denigrations there was also a recognition of his greatness and a certain admiration, fascination and even esteem for someone who was recognised as the last great figure of French history, for his brilliance, his ability to achieve successes even when the resources available were limited and when the opposition seemingly occupied the higher ground. There were, of course, ups and downs in the ways in which de Gaulle was portrayed. His grandeur had not always been so visible in the wartime years and his prestige obviously declined as he aged, especially during and after the events of 1968. At his death we can see a return to the images of grandeur.



Fig. 7 : Jak, *Evening Standard*, 11 November 1970,
British Cartoon Archive, 18963.

To go back to the comparisons seen above, was he portrayed as a Napoleon-like figure in order to present him as a madman or as a great strategist and politician who had saved his country from chaos and, like Napoleon, without benefitting from any of the advantages of high birth? Was he, like Joan of Arc, a national hero or a deranged mind hearing voices? Like Napoleon, de Gaulle may variously be seen as source of British fears, as an upstart figure, playing a game beyond his means, or more flatteringly as a tactical genius, politically and militarily, able to achieve victory even in adverse conditions. British politicians from left and right, from Churchill, Montgomery, Macmillan and George Brown, talked of him as a great man. Diplomats, journalists and many later historians followed suit. We find similar images of de Gaulle as a towering figure in many contemporary cartoons.

The comparisons often made in cartoons between de Gaulle and the British leaders of the same time served to reinforce this positive image of

de Gaulle as a truly great man. By the 1960s these were clearly showing that the boot was very much on the other, French, foot. In 1962, for example, Macmillan vehemently complained to de Gaulle that he was making a deliberate attempt to re-establish Napoleon's continental blockade but this was a Napoleon who was winning, imposing his will on Europe and successfully blocking British ambitions. The cartoonists recognised that de Gaulle now held the upper hand, dominating those around him, including the British Prime Ministers. This was a recurrent theme in their work and was also, less willingly and far less publicly, recognised by British policy makers. The image most frequently found is that of de Gaulle's imposing frame blocking the route to British politicians and diplomats. Another favourite idea of the cartoonists was that of a simple comparison with de Gaulle dwarfing other leaders, especially the British Prime Ministers, Macmillan, Home and Wilson, thus reinforcing the stature of a true statesman, of the great man towering over the minnows around him.²⁵ By the early-1960s it was the British as much as de Gaulle who were being presented as Don Quixote tilting at windmills or who were now being burnt at the stake like Joan of Arc with de Gaulle in the role of executioner²⁶; it was Britain that had, as the Foreign Office recognised, met its Waterloo with de Gaulle's veto of their EEC application and Wilson playing the part of a defeated Napoleon.²⁷



Fig. 8 : Vicky, *New Statesman*, 25 January 1963,
British Cartoon Archive, VY2125.

²⁵ For example Vicky, *Evening Standard*, 14 April 1959, and Emmwood, *Daily Mail*, 19 October 1967, BCA VY1455, MW2370 and BCA IL0116, DL2931, MC0489, MW0596; ILW3611; ILW3557.

²⁶ Vicky, *New Statesman*, 25 January, 1963, BCA VY2125.

²⁷ Cummings, *Daily Express*, 30 October 1964, BCA 06093.



Fig. 9 : Cummings, *Daily Express*, 30 October 1964,
British Cartoon Archive, 06093.

In conclusion, therefore, should we see the record left by the cartoon depictions of de Gaulle as highlighting his greatness or his madness, his heroism or his monstrosity? And how do these compare to the record left in the official accounts of the time and in the later recollections of British leaders? The Conservative politician Robert Boothby recorded saying to Churchill: ‘Roosevelt hated de Gaulle, and that was understandable. You did something worse. You underestimated him. He is in your class, and that is where the historians will put him.’ Churchill, he wrote, ‘did not answer.’²⁸ During the wartime years many British observers, like British cartoonists, had made much of de Gaulle’s lesser status compared to the so-called ‘big three’ of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Cartoons of the time often showed



Fig. 10 : Emmwood, *Daily Mail*, 12 November 1970,
British Cartoon Archive, MW2693.

²⁸ Lord Boothby, *Recollections of a Rebel*, London, Hutchinson, 1978, pp. 241-42.

de Gaulle excluded from the inner circles at Yalta and Potsdam, uninvited to the high table of world affairs. When he died other cartoonists showed him, posthumously, being invited into this inner sanctum of the greats of twentieth century history and it is alongside them that he should be placed.

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