

BACKGROUND BOOKS

FRANCE

Are the French like no other people?

There is much testimony in the affirmative, from Gustave Flaubert's claim that the French are "the premier people in the universe" to Charles de Gaulle's view of France as a land of "destiny." French youths are still taught that "the hexagon," the map-maker's six-sided France, was always fated for greatness among nations.

The hexagon idea, at least, is a "myth." So argues Sanche de Gramont in **The French: Portrait of a People** (Putnam's, 1969). The French-born, Yale-educated journalist (who, now a U.S. citizen, writes under the name Ted Morgan) notes that France was not "geographically predestined to become a nation, as were such spatially defined units as the British Isles, Italy, and the Iberian peninsula."

Its name comes from the Franks, Germanic tribes who during the fifth century ended the Romans' rule of what *they* called Gaul. But by the ninth century, when the Catholic emperor Charles the Great held sway, "the French" were of Neolithic stock and that of Celtic, Roman, Frankish, Burgundian, and Norman *arrivistes*. Their initial success, dating from when the Gauls grew wheat and Cistercian monks burned forests to make fertilizer ash, lacked *gloire*: They built Europe's first society of independent farmers, an achievement "as specific to France as the network of great trading cities was to Rome and the need for an empire-conquering navy was to . . . Britain."

After the 10th-century fall of Charles's empire, feudal nobles installed the Capetian kings, who led the 13th-century Crusades that established France's cultural influence over most of Western Europe. During the 1337-1453 Hundred Years' War, the House of Valois expelled the English from

French soil. But decades of religious conflicts and civil wars finally led to the rise of the Bourbons. Their royal power was consolidated during the 17th century by the maneuvering of cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, enabling Louis XIV to begin the costly wars that made France dominant in Western Europe.

C. B. A. Behrens's **The Ancien Régime** (Harcourt, 1967, paper) and Gordon Wright's survey **France in Modern Times: 1760 to the Present** (Rand McNally, 1960; Norton, 1981) sketch the monarchy. By the 1760s, barely one in 20 citizens were members of the First Estate (churchmen) and Second Estate (nobles), who held sinecures and tax exemptions. The crown's habit of selling official posts produced a large bureaucracy. Even then, wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in **The Old Regime and the French Revolution** (Harper, 1856; Doubleday, 1955), officials had a "mania" for "managing every thing at Paris."

The upheaval of 1789 is examined in several academic works, such as Georges Lefebvre's **The French Revolution** (Columbia, 1964). James H. Billington's **Fire in the Minds of Men** (Basic, 1980, cloth & paper) examines how the rebellion, unlike earlier ones in Holland, England, and America, became less dedicated to liberty than to a collectivist equality and fraternity, serving as a model for the intellectuals (Marx, Bakunin, Lenin) who later spread the "revolutionary faith" to Germany, Russia, and beyond.

In France, the revolution brought on a cycle of domestic tumult and wartime victory and defeat that extended from Napoleon Bonaparte's First Empire (1804-15) to Napoleon III's disaster in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Gordon Wright's **The Reshaping of French Democracy** (Reynal & Hitch-

cock, 1948; Fertig, 1970) picks up France's evolution with the 1870-1940 Third Republic. While its constitution offered "history's first example of the parliamentary republic," it was no recipe for stability. The Third Republic, during its span, had 102 cabinets and 14 presidents, whose modest gifts prompted Georges Clemenceau's quip, "I vote for the most stupid."

Roger Shattuck's **The Banquet Years** (Random, 1968) deals with the *belle époque*, the 30-year stretch of relative peace roughly bisected by the Paris Exhibition of 1889. These decades brought Baron Haussmann's remodeling of Paris (completed in 1880), aviator Louis Blériot's English Channel flight (1909), and a cultural flowering led by Monet, Matisse, and Renoir in painting; Debussy and Saint-Saëns in music; Edmond Rostand (*Cyrano de Bergerac*) and Sarah Bernhardt in drama; and poets and writers Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Emile Zola, and Marcel Proust.

Born during the *belle époque* was the man who seemed later to be its living antithesis, Charles de Gaulle.

The towering general who led the Free French during World War II and "picked the Republic out of the gutter" (his phrase) told his own story; **The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle** (Simon & Schuster, 1964, cloth; Da Capo, 1967, paper) has been called "a monument to de Gaulle, by de Gaulle." But the list of books *about* him continues to grow. Some titles: Jean Lacouture's **De Gaulle** (Editions du Seuil, 1965; New American Library, 1966); Brian Crozier's **De Gaulle** (Scribner's, 1973); Don Cook's **Charles de Gaulle: A Biography** (Putnam's, 1983).

The general looms large in other works about his times. David Schoen-

brun's story of the World War II Resistance, **Soldiers of the Night** (Dutton, 1980; New American Library, 1980), recalls how de Gaulle's broadcasts from London assailed the peace arranged with the Germans by Marshal Philippe Pétain, his onetime commanding officer, as "dishonorable," and how he sent emissaries to assure the faction-ridden anti-Nazi underground that he was "a true son of France."

As Alistair Horne relates in his vivid chronicle of France's last colonial struggle, **A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962** (Viking, 1978, cloth; Penguin, 1979, paper), when de Gaulle was called to power to resolve the Algeria crisis in 1958 at age 67, his old mystique was intact. A French author wrote that "the best known of Frenchmen" remained "a monolith of indecipherable hieroglyphs"—while British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan concluded after a Paris visit that he was "as obstinate as ever."

Why did President de Gaulle block Britain's entry into the Common Market (1963, 1967), pull France out of NATO (1966), pique Ottawa by hailing *Québec française* during a visit to Canada, and embrace Israel only to turn later to the Arabs? In **Decline or Renewal?** (Viking, 1974), Harvard's Stanley Hoffmann agrees that de Gaulle "liked the stage" but insists that he also "had a script." The rule of world politics that "whoever slows down or stays put falls behind," says Hoffmann, holds true, particularly for middle-weight powers such as France.

De Gaulle did not romanticize his fellow countrymen, but he had faith in their collective talents. France, he wrote, *was* special, "going back and forth endlessly from grandeur to decline, but restored from century to century by the genius of renewal."