

Essay on a matter of perspective reflections on conflicting views of history

[Literature](#), [Biography](#)



A Matter of Perspective: Reflections on Conflicting Views of History

If the study of history is a matter of perspective, then so is the question of whether it is better to contemplate history from a personal perspective, or from the vantage point of the great and powerful. Irene Nemirovsky's *Suite Francaise*, and Charles de Gaulle: A Brief Biography with Documents represent two vastly different viewpoints. Charles Cogan's 1996 biography features never-before-seen primary sources and recounts the life of a man whose political fortunes were part and parcel of French post-war history. Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man Theory" of history (an inheritor of Plutarch's "exemplary lives" model) was a remnant of the Romantic period, asserting that men like de Gaulle are "heroes," supermen of a Nietzschean magnitude. 1 In Carlyle's time, it would have seemed absurd to contend that the experiences and actions of people who do not command great armies could yield unique and significant interpretations of historical events. Yet such is the case. *Suite Francaise* arose from the all-too-real experiences of its author who, like many of the characters in her novel, did not survive the Holocaust. Her account, though fictional, shows that the experiences and insights of people who live during epochal events are as important to our understanding of history as are the grand remembrances of leaders who shape history. However, it is the prestige of, and fascination with, the "exemplary life" which shapes the perception that the study of great men is the most fruitful way to approach history. One should not discount the persistent fascination with personalities. "It is as if Thomas Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory of history had been genetically crossed with People magazine to

create a genre of historical infotainment: retrospection compounded of scholarship,

vivid period drama and soap opera at the highest levels.”²

The outsized literary treatment of great personalities has a long history. In his *Parallel Lives*, it quickly becomes clear that the Greek philosopher and writer Plutarch comprehended the power of using famous individuals as models of human behavior. Historian Tim Duff identifies two key aspects of Plutarch’s famous work, its “moralizing purpose and (its) comparative structure through which Plutarch’s moralism is so often mediated.”³ Thus, when Plutarch compares Coriolanus and Alcibiades, it is all the more interesting in that Plutarch treats their histories as morality plays; in other words, he presents a story to which the reader can easily relate. This is what compels: the ability to meditate on personality traits that lead to success or render the subject vulnerable. There are few more outsized historical figures than Charles deGaulle, a man whose life and career allows a ready contemplation of this interplay between fate and persona. This offers another level in which to study deGaulle’s embodiment of France, and what it meant to be French, in the Fourth Republic.

It is generally agreed upon that the conclusions one may draw from a thorough contemplation of seminal historical figures come from retrospection, after the passage of time. However, Nemirovsky shows that the “real time” observations of events need not be interpreted through the “filter” of time. In a 2006 *New York Times* review, Paul Gray notes that the date of Nemirovsky’s death coincides with the period of which she writes.

This, Gray writes, “ induces disbelief. It means that, it can only mean, that she wrote the exquisitely shaped and balanced fiction of ‘ Suite Francaise’ almost contemporaneously with the events that inspired them, and everyone knows such a thing cannot be done.”⁴ When Nemirovsky writes that “ what is certain is that in five, ten or twenty years, this problem unique to our timewill no longer exist, it will be replaced by others,”⁵ it is an observation of remarkable foresight, one which can only come from someone who has suffered from “ the problem” and gained the singular perspective that only suffering can bestow. The interconnected stories in the section entitled “ Storm in June” read like a latter day ‘ Canterbury Tales,’” and are “ laced with keen insight, tender irony, and merciless frankness.”⁶ This is a highly personal way of reflecting on history that transcends the monolithic study of personalities. Nemirovsky’s writing is reminiscent of what Gray says spans the observational spectrum, “ from the hastily reactive to the serenely reflective,” Nemirovsky having achieved a perspective unusual in that it is contemporaneous with the historical event it describes⁷

Thus, one may see crucial differences between the serene reflection to which Gray refers in Suite Francaise, and a “ macro” study of a lion of history, as in Cogan’s biography. One offers a broader, populist, “ bottom-up” interpretation of events while the other is concerned with the actions of an individual and the consequences of those actions. Nemirovsky’s novel is a literary/historic hybrid offering a more expansive concept of history than one would expect from a biography. Suite Francaise, as literature, actually offers a deeper, more contextual consideration of history, while the study of de

Gaulle and his influence on the Fourth Republic manifests a far more overt concern with cause-and-effect and, as such, is what a historian might call “traditional history.” Much of what has unfolded in Europe after de Gaulle’s death, such as European political unity, reflects his priorities and influence. Yet studying history as a

succession of interconnected events loses the “human” element that a historic-literary contribution can provide.

Another pitfall of the “Great Men” school of history is its susceptibility to myth-making and to revisionism. The tendency to see important figures from the past through rose-colored glasses is part of the “personality cult” which, for better or worse, has made this approach to history so popular. De Gaulle saw himself as the exiled leader, returned not once but twice as the crusading avenger bent on restoring his country to its greatness. “With Joan of Arc on his right hand and the Revolution on his left, de Gaulle completed his imaginary pantheon with Clemenceau and Foch, two emblematic heroic figures of the great war – an inevitable historical reference for his generation and the determining period in forming (his) imagination.”⁸ As Thomas Meaney points out in an article in *The Nation*, de Gaulle was the most polarizing figure in France during his life, but this has not stopped the French from turning his story into “a kind of collective fairy tale that the French have agreed to believe in.”⁹ Meaney notes that de Gaulle has been lionized posthumously despite the contradictions that marked his career; he was, for instance, a French Army general raised as a Catholic who often found himself in conflict with the church and military.¹⁰

It is interesting to contrast this canonized view of de Gaulle with characters from *Suite Française*, particularly the Michauds, who avoid moral contradictions despite the madness that surrounds them. They stand in contrast to the deluded and confused characters in the novel. With the Germans approaching Paris, people hurriedly make preparations to flee, including the

Michaud's self-important employer, who warns that they had better be in Tours by the day after tomorrow if they hope to keep their jobs. As he drives away, the Michauds, caught up in the absurdity of the situation, maintain their dignity and, above all, their sense of humor. "The Michauds were left standing on the pavement, looking at each other. 'Well, that's the way to do it,' Michaud said. 'Give the people you should be apologizing to a good telling off, that's it!'"¹¹ It is as though Nemirovsky is reassuring that it is common humanity that survives, and which surpasses even the monuments and memorials to the great and powerful.

It is this dichotomy between the "average" person and a towering figure like de Gaulle that makes such a fascinating contrast. As bemused participants in events, Nemirovsky's Michauds have no interest in history other than to survive it, which makes their perspective all the more compelling. That perspective is subsumed within the ideologies and achievements of the famous. In his famous 1946 Bayeux speech, de Gaulle makes a telling statement that encapsulates his view of his role in government and his place in history. In restoring the French government, he said, "above political contingencies (there should) be established a national arbitration that would

bring continuity in the midst of (political) combinations.”¹² In other words, de Gaulle will make the important decisions. It is his bold assumption of power that makes us want to know more about him, and which makes the study of history through the eyes of such men so popular. Yet anecdotal evidence offers a more humane understanding of events, and expands the boundaries of historic inquiry.

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