France in Churchill’s *The Second World War*

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The similarities between Churchill and de Gaulle have already been examined in great detail, but another one could perhaps be added here. The celebrated opening sentence of the first volume of de Gaulle’s *Mémoires de guerre*, ‘Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France’, could just as easily have been written by Churchill. Gordon Craig reminds us that Winston Churchill knew little about Germany and was only remotely interested in its great figures.¹ This is not the place to discuss Churchill’s views on Germany, but Craig goes on with what appears to be a sweeping statement on Churchill’s supposed lack of interest in foreign countries: ‘this was, for the most part, true of his attitude towards other countries as well’.² In the same book, Craig’s opinion is indeed immediately contradicted in the next chapter, ‘Churchill and France’, by Douglas Johnson:

His knowledge of French history was considerable and was spread over a wide period. He yielded to no-one in his admiration for Joan of Arc, whom he described as ‘the winner’ (and he was always insistent that it was not the English who had burned her, but the Burgundians). His sense of humour sometimes misled others into thinking that he was ignorant of French history, as when he urged his compatriots to drink Veuve-Clicquot champagne, since it would support a worthy French woman who had been widowed in the First World War.³

And, though Churchill did not go to France until he was 17, in 1891, one can argue that his links with that country were almost consubstantial with his existence, since it is in Paris, in the British embassy’s chapel, that his parents were married, on 15 April 1874; moreover, the date of
his premature birth – 30 November 1874 – perfectly supports the con-
jecture that he may have been conceived in France. In addition, at the
time of his first attempt to get a place at Sandhurst, in 1890, his best
marks were in French (1218/2000), just before English history (987/ 2000).

When he came to write his The Second World War⁴ some 60 years later,
his taste for these two subjects constantly manifested itself, and indeed
his book begins with a historical narrative of the mistakes made by ‘the
English-speaking peoples’ since the Versailles Treaty which includes a
tribute to France in the form of the phrase ‘Thank God for the French
Army’.

**Thank God for the French Army**

In a remarkable speech, delivered in March 1939 before his fellow
Conservative MPs, Churchill explained why supporting France against
Germany was only showing one’s realism, without any sentimentality:

Observe that the policy of England takes no account of which nation
it is that seeks the overlordship of Europe. The question is not
whether it is Spain, or the French Monarchy, or the French Empire,
or the German Empire, or the Hitler régime. It has nothing to do with
rulers or nations; it is concerned solely with whoever is the strongest
or the potentially dominant tyrant. Therefore we should not be afraid
of being accused of being pro-French or anti-German. If the circum-
stances were reversed, we could equally be pro-German and anti-
French. It is a law of public policy which we are following, and not
a mere expedient dictated by accidental circumstances, or likes and
dislikes, or any other sentiment.

The question therefore arises which is to-day the Power in Europe
which is the strongest, and which seeks in a dangerous and oppres-
sive sense to dominate. To-day, for this year, probably for part of
1937, the French Army is the strongest in Europe. But no one is afraid
of France.⁵

In the course of his demonstration, he makes no distinction in the
struggle against Philip II, Louis XVI, Napoleon or William II. But this
apparent impartiality is in fact contradicted by the tenor of the next
volumes, in which he does not really manage to conceal his affection for
Napoleon. Admittedly, Napoleon is shown in a negative light when
Churchill compares Hitler in May 1941 to the Emperor in 1804: