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William Mortimer Moore, *Free France's Lion: The Life of Philippe Leclerc, de Gaulle's Greatest General*. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2011. Pp. xx, 508. ISBN 978-1-61200-068-8.

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Aside from Charles de Gaulle himself, Philippe Leclerc is by far the most famous French general of the Second World War, yet until now there has been no biography of him in English. British author William Mortimer Moore has addressed this need in a detailed, highly nuanced, and accessible account of his life and military career, thus closing major gaps in the English-language literature on the French role in the war in Africa and Europe.

Leclerc's life story certainly makes excellent fodder for a would-be novelist¹ turned historian. Born Philippe de Hauteclocque in 1902, he came from the petty nobility of Picardy. His father had served in the French cavalry and fought in the First World War; Philippe, following in his footsteps, became a career officer in the cavalry and an early proponent of armored warfare in the years after the war. He also served in Morocco, where he learned valuable lessons about guerrilla warfare, leading colonial soldiers, and fighting in the desert. Like many other noblemen and officers, he and his family had strong right-wing leanings, but he was above all a patriot and had no qualms about fighting the Nazis. Caught up in the Allied disaster in Belgium in 1940, he evaded the Germans and made it back to Paris and eventually to Britain to continue the fight after the French surrender. To protect the family he left behind, he now used the name Leclerc.

In London, he joined de Gaulle's fledgling Free French movement. He soon found himself in French Equatorial Africa with virtually no resources, charged with bringing the massive colony under Free French jurisdiction. Unlike de Gaulle's failed attempt to seize Dakar by force, Leclerc's mission was a complete success. Using more deceit and diplomacy than force, he won over elements in the garrisons of various parts of the colony and convinced Vichy loyalists to surrender to him. By the end of 1940, the entire region was under his control. He then organized a chewing-gum-and-twine campaign to harass the Italians in the North African desert. In the process, he formed close ties with many of his young officers, who stayed with him throughout the war as part of his leadership cadre and personal staff when he moved on to command larger units. These men were with him when he captured the oasis at Kufra and became famous for their oath not to stop fighting until they had liberated France. Later on, with a larger but still lightly armed desert force, Leclerc supported Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's advance across Libya after El Alamein and successfully engaged the Germans in Tunisia.

One of the strengths of Moore's work is his grasp of the complex military and political situation in the French colonies following the surrender in 1940. Most French officers and colonial administrators were politically conservative and disliked the English, their colonial rivals, more than they did the Germans. Some of the younger men, however, most of whom had missed out on the action in Europe, wanted most of all to fight for France. They provided Leclerc with the kernel of the force that eventually became the 2nd Armored Division, which he led into Paris in August 1944. Moore also notes that many of the rank and file, who were mostly Africans, being well aware of Nazi racial doctrines, preferred the Free French to the Vichy regime.

At the other end of the scale, Moore clarifies the high-level politics behind de Gaulle's efforts to induce the British and Americans to recognize him as the leader of all French forces on the Allied side. He also describes the difficulties of reintegrating Leclerc's Free French forces with the much larger number of former Vichy troops that had rallied to the Allies following the Anglo-American Operation Torch landings in 1942. Moore characterizes Leclerc's position after the Allied victory in Tunisia in May 1943 as follows:

1. In his acknowledgments, Moore mentions "the unpublished novels of my young adulthood" (461).

Whatever contempt Leclerc felt for Vichy, serving de Gaulle had given him a career outside the traditional hierarchy of the army he joined in 1924. Yet he was still a man of tradition and obedience. The rifts between Frenchmen took on a new complexity once the US military machine was ensconced on French Imperial soil. No longer could Leclerc call Vichy, “The hook on which men hang their cowardice.” That hook no longer existed in North Africa. To paraphrase Napoleon, “After a battle there are only men.” However much Leclerc wanted the moral satisfaction of seeing the formerly pro-Vichy Armée d’Afrique knuckle under to de Gaulle’s Free French establishment, for the time being he had to live in an American-funded world and accept as comrades French soldiers he had recently branded cowards. (195–96)

Moore next provides a detailed account of the creation of this new French army, most of which remained in the Mediterranean and fought in Italy before landing in southern France in August 1944; Leclerc’s own 2nd Armored Division joined in the Normandy campaign. Aside from political issues, Leclerc faced very real problems of training, doctrine, and supply. Logistics, too, were complicated by the need to work with the Americans, whose procedures and equipment differed from the British ones they had become familiar with previously.

Once the Normandy campaign began, the French found themselves waiting impatiently, first in England and then in France, to get into action. As the lone French unit in a sea of American forces, Leclerc and his men wanted to be more than token representatives of Free France. But the Allied high command saw Leclerc as de Gaulle’s man and wanted to keep him from acting independently in ways that might cause political or military problems. Leclerc’s division fought well during the Normandy breakout, and he proved to be an effective armored commander with a good feel for mobile warfare. He won the respect of his corps commander, Gen. Wade Haislip, who gave him a longer leash than Bradley or Eisenhower might have wanted. This allowed Leclerc to skirt orders and take the lead in the advance on Paris. Here, Moore elaborates on the decision to enter Paris, something most British and American histories of the campaign tend to omit. Moore follows Leclerc and his division through the rest of the war, covering both their battles and the problems of reuniting with the larger French army under Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny in Alsace.

Following the war, the self-effacing Leclerc, now a national hero, did his best to stay out of politics. He remained in the army and was dispatched to Indochina to try to impose order on a precarious situation. He had only limited success and (futilely) advised his government to negotiate rather than fight. His final mission was in North Africa, where there was widespread unrest, especially in Algeria. That mission went unfinished when he died in a plane crash in 1947.

Perhaps letting his novelist’s instincts get the better of him, Moore begins the book with Leclerc’s last days, death, and funeral, thereby setting a sentimental, even hagiographic tone that persists into the early part of the book, on Leclerc’s family background and younger life. This may reflect the fact that Leclerc left no memoirs and that the information on his early life comes mostly from his correspondence and the reminiscences of family and friends after his death. Once the war began and he assumed a more prominent role, the quantity and quality of source materials increase significantly, and Moore is able to strike a better balance. Leclerc was in fact an admirable man who (usually) made wise decisions and accomplished much under difficult circumstances. But Moore also highlights his subject’s early support for right-wing groups like Charles Maurras’s *Action Française* and his sometimes problematic refusal to forgive former Vichy supporters.

William Mortimer Moore has written a highly readable, compelling, and well-researched work geared toward a general audience. Military historians may find his analyses of the larger campaigns and battles of the war rather superficial; academic scholars, noting that the book rests entirely on published materials, may find it more synthetic than truly original. To his credit, however, Moore does make extensive use of primary source materials. And, too, since most of Leclerc’s correspondence has been published along with the recollections of those who knew and worked with him, it is not clear just what further archival research could have added to the narrative. (The French biographies of Leclerc that Moore draws on have mined the available sources very thoroughly as well.) Derivative or not, *Free France’s Lion* offers so much material otherwise unavailable in English that both specialists and general readers will profit from reading it.