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Talleyrand: the old fraud

by *Andrew Roberts*

Books in this article

Robin Harris:

Talleyrand; Betrayer and Saviour of France.

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A review of Talleyrand; Betrayer and Saviour of France by Robin Harris.

Charles-Maurice, Prince de Talleyrand-Périgord, has been very well served by biographers. Alfred Duff Cooper's 1932 life of the long-serving French politician and diplomat is an ornament of English letters, and since then four other impressive works have been written on the same subject. Like his distinguished predecessors, Robin Harris admires his subject and has no hesitation in hailing Talleyrand as a progressive statesman.¹ Fortunately, however, he also gives the reader plenty of evidence

to support a radically different view, that Talleyrand was in fact one of the most revolting human beings to have besmirched the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Written with immense scholarship, captivating wit, and a natural feel for European politics in the turbulent half-century between Louis XV and Louis-Philippe, Harris has subtitled his book “Betrayal and Saviour of France.” The first part of the epithet is undeniable—Talleyrand comprehensively betrayed every monarch and government he ever swore to serve—but it is left unproven that Talleyrand ever really saved France. What he did do on every conceivable occasion was to offer French foreign policy to the highest foreign bidder, although in his defense it might be argued that he rarely delivered. As Harris admits, his hero practiced “venality on a scale that made even venal contemporaries blush.”

Yet Talleyrand was forgiven by regime after regime. His own explanation why his various lies and crimes never seemed to be held against him was “the frivolity of the French,” which might indeed have been a reason. He was constantly forgiven, and allowed to betray another day, because of his supposedly attractive personality. Yet as this book allows the reader to discern between the lines, for all his (well-rehearsed and carefully arranged) *bon mots*, Talleyrand was an extremely nasty piece of work.

One also wonders quite how many witticisms—the nineteenth century equivalent of sound-bites—were genuinely made by him, since he was one of those people to whom good jokes were accredited, like Noel Coward, Oscar Wilde, and Winston Churchill later on. Moreover, Talleyrand delighted in puns, which must rival even sarcasm as the lowest form of wit.

Although Talleyrand came from a noble family, it was nothing like so grand or ancient as he subsequently claimed. Born with a severely deformed right foot, Talleyrand was disinherited by his parents in favor of a younger brother, and went into the church rather than the army. He hated his parents both for that and for being constantly short of cash. Like Byron and Goebbels, who were also club-footed, Talleyrand developed a meretricious personal charm to compensate, which went down particularly well with women. Whenever he got into serious scrapes, Talleyrand would mobilize his female friends to help him, although he rarely reciprocated.

Given the choice between telling the truth or dissimulating, he would dissimulate, even though it brought him no appreciable benefits. (He claimed, for example, that his feet had been deformed in an accident.) Robin Harris has been hard put to eke out the truth from the multilayered lies Talleyrand told about himself, but has triumphantly succeeded.

It was as a Catholic priest that Talleyrand discovered the joys of sex, boasting at his seminary about his inseminations. We cannot be sure about the exact number of his illegitimate children, as he failed to acknowledge some but not others. Later in life he made a mistress out of his nephew's wife.

The contradictions of Talleyrand's life—the libertine priest, social-climbing aristocrat, bibliophile who sold his library three times, bishop who equipped a privateer, excommunicant who was given the Last Rites—are so wildly improbable as to make Talleyrand's career vividly colorful. (Which is why the publishers of this book should not have reproduced the magnificently colorful paintings by Prud'hon, David, Vigée-Lebrun, and Gillray in boring black-and-white throughout.)

It was Talleyrand's uncle, the archbishop of Rheims, who got him into the priesthood, even though by then the ordinand was most probably atheist. Nepotism also won him the job of Agent-General of the Catholic Church after 1780, sworn to defend ecclesiastical privilege. (It was the first of very many causes he was to betray.) Owing to a fortunate series of episcopal deaths, he was appointed Bishop of Autun in January 1789 by Louis XVI, to whom he had sworn allegiance at his coronation (and the subject of his second betrayal).

During the Revolution six months later, Talleyrand started his lifelong policy of staying in close secret touch with all sides. He joined the moderate revolutionaries, but he also wrote the speech that the King delivered to the National Assembly the day after the Bastille fell. In October 1789 he proposed the confiscation of church property, but the following July he officiated at a Mass in front of half a million people to celebrate the anniversary of the Bastille's fall. That very evening he broke the bank in not one but two casinos, at least according to his own notoriously unreliable memoirs.

In May 1791 Talleyrand wrote to the King of his "zeal" for the royal cause, but in August 1792 he drafted the government's proclamation of a republic. The onset of the Terror saw him leave for London, and so he kept his head while all those around him were losing theirs. He did not denounce the Revolution, however, until the authorities formally listed him as an émigré. While in Britain, he wrote that the French should "never have the ridiculous pretension to be masters in another's domain," and presented himself as a man of peace.

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The British—especially William Pitt the Younger and George III—had no difficulty in seeing through Talleyrand’s gross, flattery-based charm and expelled him in February 1794, whereupon he went to New York and Philadelphia, befriending fellow-exiles such as Henri-François Blacons. After the fall of Robespierre, Talleyrand was allowed home. (He later claimed not to have solicited his recall, which in fact he had.) When Blacons, who also returned, found himself poverty-stricken and in debt, he begged Talleyrand for a place in the French foreign ministry which by then was in his old friend’s gift. Talleyrand failed even to reply to the letter; when told of his friend’s subsequent suicide, the great wit merely yawned and murmured “Poor Blacons.”

In order to get himself appointed foreign minister under the Directory, Talleyrand mobilized women like Madame de Staël. Despite having promoted Anglo-French peace and reconciliation whilst in exile in London, he now parroted the Directory’s line by advocating war with Britain and the execution of royalist plotters. “We’ve a position!” he told his friend Benjamin Constant, squeezing his knee in excitement when the good news came through. “We must make an immense fortune, an immense fortune, an immense fortune!”

It is impossible to discern any consistency whatever in the policies Talleyrand pursued. His biographers—including Harris—point to a lifetime’s support for free trade, an entente with Britain, a free press, liberal constitutions, and political moderation. “Talleyrand was always a liberal,” concludes the author, “but he started as a liberal utopian and ended as a liberal conservative.” Yet for all that he professed these things in the smartest political salons of the most chic Parisian arrondissements, Talleyrand served regimes such as the Directory and First Empire that outlawed free trade, fought Britain, banned newspapers, effected military coups, and were profoundly immoderate.

Talleyrand outdid even his own standards of sycophancy when trying to attach himself to the rising star of General Bonaparte on his return to France in 1796. “The name alone of Bonaparte is a help that smoothes out every obstacle,” he wrote to the victor of the Rivoli, Arcola, and Lodi.

Certainly nothing was smoother than his own change of allegiance from Paul Barras to Bonaparte, persuading the Directory to accept Napoleon’s terms in the Campo Formio peace treaty with Austria, and ending his letters: “Farewell, Peace-Maker General!” Talleyrand threw enormous fêtes in Josephine’s honor to celebrate Napoleon’s return to Paris in December 1797. When he heard that the soldier had cut Madame de Staël at a party, he swiftly ended his friendship with his ex-lover who had done so much to help his career.

It was originally Talleyrand’s idea that France should invade Egypt, although he subsequently attempted to blame it on others once the campaign had ended in ignominy. The collapse of the Directory’s prestige during the notorious XYZ bribery affair—when Talleyrand demanded cash from the

Americans in return for altering French foreign policy in their favor—finally forced his resignation in July 1799, but by then Bonaparte was the coming man, and contemplating the forcible seizure of power.

If Talleyrand had really given a hoot about liberal constitutions, he would not have supported Napoleon's Brumaire coup that November, but since he knew that that was the best way for him to return to the foreign ministry, from where he could continue to hawk France's foreign policy around Europe for cash, he became a prime plotter, and after the coup was successful he duly received his reward.

Talleyrand's relations with Napoleon, according to Robin Harris's perceptive comment, "sometimes resembled a love affair or perhaps a marriage, even if it never amounted to a friendship." Ever the assiduous courtier, Talleyrand anticipated Napoleon's moods, pandered to his prejudices, even seemed to read his thoughts. The sycophancy makes cringe-making reading, even given the idiom of French eighteenth-century flattery. "Permit me to repeat that I love you," Talleyrand wrote in June 1801, inquiring of Napoleon's health, "that I am afflicted at leaving, that I have the most lively impatience to come near you again, and that my devotion will only end with my life." In fact, his devotion didn't even last to the end of the decade.

Just as he always tried to stay in touch with all sides in domestic politics, so internationally Talleyrand solicited bribes from every side of any dispute. Commissions and retainers had to be paid in cash, and by 1803 he was receiving regular bribes from Austria, Prussia, Naples, the Pope, the King of Sardinia, the Cisalpine Republic, the Batavian Republic, and the Ottoman Grand Vizier. Chateaubriand recalled how Talleyrand made five or six

fortunes, including a million francs from Portugal, “in the hope of a signature of a peace that was never signed; by the purchase of Belgian bonds at the Peace of Amiens, which he knew about before it was made public; by the erection of the temporary kingdom of Etruria; by the secularization of ecclesiastical property in Germany; by the trading of his opinions at the Congress of Vienna.”

The money accrued allowed him to live in a succession of ever grander chateaux, and when he needed to sell them he would blackmail government officials to buy them off him (at inflated prices) or risk losing their jobs. He wound up at the magnificent Renaissance chateau of Valençay, although this was largely bought out of state funds.

As a very profitable sideline, Talleyrand became Court Chamberlain to Napoleon, who ordered him, for reasons of respectability, to get married. Talleyrand took a wife he privately despised, while writing on the marriage certificate that his mother was dead. (She wasn't.) The wedding was illegal because the Vatican demanded celibacy even from laicized clergy, but since husband and wife soon hated one another and lived separately, there was little sin involved. When the Princesse de Talleyrand died, her husband remarked: “This greatly simplifies matters.”

The kidnapping and murder of the innocent young Bourbon, the Duc d'Enghien, in 1804 was originally Talleyrand's idea, however much he later tried to destroy all the evidence in the state archives that connected him with it. His witticism that “It was more serious than a crime, it was a mistake” failed to acknowledge that it was in fact *his* mistake. Far from being the shrewd counselor of historical mythology, Talleyrand constantly made

appalling errors, but he was almost never forced to take responsibility for them. For all his supposed free trade beliefs, he never opposed the Berlin Decrees of November 1806 that created the protectionist Continental System, for example, which led to the two wars in Spain and Russia that together eventually helped to bring Napoleon down.

Fawning and compliant to Napoleon's face, Talleyrand came to loathe him and intrigue behind his back. Yet he needed to stay foreign minister in order to squeeze bribes out of those Great Powers that mistakenly believed he had influence over the Emperor. He also pimped enthusiastically for Napoleon, identifying lovers for him (unbeknownst to Josephine, whose confidant he remained while she was still Empress).

It was after Napoleon's pyrrhic victory at Eylau in February 1807 that Talleyrand first plotted treason against Napoleon, suddenly resigning that August when he came to suspect that the Bonapartist adventure might end badly. He stayed on in the lucrative Court Chamberlain role, of course, which allowed him to pretend to foreign powers that he still had the Emperor's ear.

One of the reasons the French indulged Talleyrand so much and for so long was that he indulged them. He employed the best chef in Europe—perhaps in history—Antonin Carême, and entertained lavishly. His luncheons and dinners would feature up to forty-eight different entrées; he owned Château Haut-Brion; he was followed by four chefs and ten table-servers wherever he traveled. The generosity of his hospitality was undeniable, even though it was often secretly financed out of state funds rather than by him. Once, after he extolled brie as “the king of cheeses,” it was remarked in the salons that it was

“the only monarch he didn’t betray.” (For all his fine manners, this book reveals that Talleyrand would occasionally do nasal gargles both at table and during the two hours he took to dress in the mornings.)

At the peace negotiations at Erfurt in September 1808, Talleyrand met Tsar Alexander I of Russia in secret most evenings to tell him what Napoleon was planning. The Tsar sat taking notes, as Talleyrand advised him not to make an alliance with France. Since 450,000 of his countrymen and their allies were to die in Russia four years later, Talleyrand bears a heavy responsibility for their deaths. “Men like M. de Talleyrand are like sharp instruments with which it is dangerous to play,” concluded a sagacious Prince Metternich (a long-term paymaster).

By January 1809 Talleyrand’s treason had gone too far. Along with his co-conspirator, the sinister Minister of Police, Joseph Fouché, Talleyrand plotted to replace Napoleon on the throne with Marshal Murat, should the Emperor be defeated in Spain. On discovering this, Napoleon returned to the Tuileries palace in a white rage. Harris believes that he probably did not in fact use the famous phrase “a shit in silk stockings” to describe Talleyrand on that particular occasion, but he did denounce him to his privy council in unmeasured terms.

Those who seek to portray Napoleon as a forerunner of Hitler and Stalin need to explain why he did not simply have Talleyrand and Fouché shot for treason. He would have saved himself and France much trouble if he had silenced his Grand Chamberlain’s forked and malicious tongue forever there and then. Instead, Talleyrand got his female friends—particularly Hortense de Beauharnais and Madame de Rémusat—to help him

out as usual, and within a week Napoleon had forgiven him. Talleyrand desperately needed this reconciliation, which he helped effect with his usual sycophancy, otherwise his bribery income from places like Saxony and Austria would have dried up overnight.

For all that Napoleon forgave Talleyrand, the Grand Chamberlain from that moment on worked constantly to bring his master down. Revenge was to be the forty-ninth of his famous entrée dishes, and it was to be enjoyed freezing cold. Owing loyalty to nothing but his lifestyle, chateaux, and bank balance, Talleyrand—in the author’s words —“worked without ceasing” to destroy the man from whom he continued to receive 495,000 francs per annum in income as Grand Chamberlain and Vice Grand Elector.

Within a fortnight of the Tuileries meeting, Talleyrand had received 100,000 francs from Metternich in return for details of French troop dispositions. During the Franco-Austrian war, he even sent copies of Napoleon’s secret memoranda to the enemy. In his memoirs, Talleyrand claimed that Napoleon “never had a dangerous conspirator against him other than himself.” It was just yet another lie.

Talleyrand believed Austria might win the forthcoming campaign, but in fact Napoleon crushed her in a matter of weeks, after which Talleyrand re-opened connections to the Tsar via their mutual friend Count Karl von Nesselrode, and began passing Napoleon’s secret plans for Sweden, Poland, and Turkey to the Russians for cash. Even when in May 1810 Napoleon discovered Talleyrand had been secretly negotiating with the British, he appointed Talleyrand’s friend and collaborator Maurice Hauterive to head the

investigation, who duly exonerated him. “Talleyrand’s treachery was remorseless and sustained, occupying all his waking moments” writes Harris, who is a generally sympathetic biographer.

While consoling Josephine on her divorce, Talleyrand helped arrange Napoleon’s marriage to the Archduchess Marie-Louise of Austria, which he did with some skill. Hoping to buy Talleyrand’s loyalty, Napoleon paid him the fabulous sum of 2.7 million francs between February 1811 and April 1812. Yet as French regimes were to discover both before and after him, there was no such thing. After the Retreat from Moscow that winter, Talleyrand reopened negotiations with the Bourbons, keeping his future options open. Apart from the idiotic advice that he should try to bribe the Duke of Wellington, Talleyrand spent 1813 distancing himself from Napoleon, while trying to stay in the Emperor’s favor should Bonapartism survive.

Behind the great soldier-Emperor’s back, Talleyrand accused Napoleon of cowardice—calling him “a man who will hide under his bed”—a blood-slander on a man who had fought seventy-two engagements and who had been wounded in the field of battle. While Napoleon and his soldiers had been braving fire and sword from Toulon to Milan to Cairo to Vienna to Berlin to Madrid to Moscow, Talleyrand had been systematically betraying their sacrifices in the salons of Paris, in a manner that lucratively lined his capacious silk and velvet pockets. It was not his fault he could not serve in the army—one foot was misshapen and claw-like, the other narrow and flattened—but it ill-behoved him to sneer at Napoleon’s undoubted personal courage.

With Napoleon's first abdication in April 1814, Talleyrand saw his opportunity. His coup against a Bonapartist Regency and in favor of Louis XVIII (from whom he by then knew he could expect a reward) depended on Alexander I believing that the Bourbons had popular legitimacy. When only a few senators accepted an invitation to a reception with the Tsar to demonstrate this, Talleyrand dressed actors up in senatorial uniform to hoodwink him. He later tricked Generals Marmont and Jourdan to order their troops to don the white Bourbon rosette by pretending to each that the other had agreed to do so. It was politics as prestidigitation, and it worked. Yet when later that year Count Nesselrode attempted to persuade Allied diplomats that Talleyrand supported the Bourbon Restoration "in his heart," they roared with laughter. They saw that Talleyrand's politics were dictated from the head and the pocket, whereas the very existence of a heart must be doubted.

The Treaty of Paris that Talleyrand concluded in May 1814 returned France to her 1792 borders; it was a sensible compromise that was virtually dictated to him by the Allies. Duly kept on as foreign minister by Louis XVIII, he represented France at the Congress of Vienna where he supported Saxony (a major private pay-master), but also the swingeing cuts in the French military budget which turned out to be a major reason for the popularity that greeted Napoleon when he returned to France from Elba in March 1815. Rather than joining Louis XVIII in exile in Ghent, Talleyrand put out feelers to the Orléanists, who he thought might emerge as a credible future monarchy among the Allies. He only joined Louis when this opportunity fizzled out, eight days after the battle of Waterloo.

When the Congress re-formed after Napoleon's second abdication, Talleyrand urged the French government to mobilize for war against Russia and Prussia, on the side of Britain, Austria, and Poland. So much for his claims always to have promoted peace, and it was moreover a war that France would almost certainly have lost. Talleyrand's complete lack of appreciation of military realities—he later predicted disaster for the French invasion of Spain in 1823, which was successful in under two months—ought alone to have disqualified him from holding diplomatic office during a period when warfare or the threat of it was constant and universal.

In July 1815, Louis XVIII appointed Talleyrand President of the Council (effectively prime minister) as well as minister of foreign affairs. The ministry only lasted ten weeks, with Talleyrand trying to remain in power through sacking his old collaborator, Fouché. His short time in office saw the disgraceful indictment of Marshal Ney, “the bravest of the brave” of Napoleon's lieutenants, who was subsequently executed.

It was Talleyrand's quip that the Bourbons had “learnt nothing and forgotten nothing” from their years in exile, but they had at least learnt not to trust him, and he never saw office under them again after September 1815. (Yet even after his fall, Talleyrand was able to salvage enough sinecures to bring him in an income of 120,000 francs per annum.)

Talleyrand, much of whose personality and career was given over to the lust for vengeance against enemies, tried to bring down those he blamed for his fall, throwing in his lot with the reactionary Bourbon royalist party, the Ultras. In order to win them over, however, he had somehow to gain the public acceptance of the Duc d'Enghien's father, the by-now-senile

Duc de Bourbon. He achieved this by securing a presentation at Court for Bourbon's mistress, the former English prostitute Sophie Dawes, who was being threatened with public disgrace by her husband, the Baron de Feuchères. After Talleyrand arranged everything, the Duc invited his son's murderer to dinner, thus stymieing any criticism from the Ultras. Whether the Duc really knew what was taking place is anyone's guess. Harris tells the sordid tale well.

It was only when Talleyrand realized that he had no hope of office under the Bourbons that he supported the Orléanists, although he kept pocketing King Charles X's annual hundred thousand francs as Grand Chamberlain. After the 1830 Revolution, the incoming regime appointed him Ambassador to London, where he served for four years systematically undermining his foreign minister behind his back through press leaks, while being pleasant to him in his official reports to Paris. When asked what his own policy of Belgian non-intervention actually meant in practice, Talleyrand admitted to his friend Lord Alvanley that it was "a metaphysical and political expression that means more or less the same as intervention." His supposed lifelong Anglophilia was subsequently negated in 1834 when he strongly supported an Austrian alliance against Britain.

If Talleyrand had lived longer, there can be little doubt that he would have betrayed Louis-Philippe to the Second Republic, and then the Second Republic to Napoleon III. Instead, he died in February 1837 aged eighty-three. He left behind nothing more substantial than a few witty *bon mots*. Harris claims that "He did espouse certain political ideas and values," which is true, but his espousal only ever lasted for as long as they never

inconvenienced him in the slightest way, especially not financially. The author hails him as “the prince of diplomats,” but gives us plenty of evidence to doubt that.

Robin Harris’s fluent, intelligent, and hugely engaging book concludes by wondering why Talleyrand converted to Catholicism on his deathbed. The author advances all the various theories that were put forward both at the time and since for why the ex-bishop made his peace with the Almighty only a matter of minutes before he died. The reader will feel that the real reason was simply that, true to lifelong form, Talleyrand was simply yet again sucking up to the incoming regime.

Evidence for Talleyrand’s treacheries and tergiversations regularly came to light throughout his career, yet because of “the frivolity of the French” he was never really held to account for them. In Britain and America, such double-dealing would have left him disgraced and hounded from public life; in Austria, Prussia, or Russia, he might have been exiled, imprisoned, or worse. In France—because of his subtlety, wit, and gourmand hospitality—he was constantly given the benefit of the doubt. It seems that among his numerous biographers, of all nationalities, the old fraud still is.

1. *Talleyrand: Betrayal and Saviour of France*, by Robin Harris; John Murray, 448 pages, £30.

Andrew Roberts’s latest book is *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (Viking).

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