

CHARLES MAURICE DE TALLEYRAND PÉRIGORD

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« You are the son of your era more than the son of your father »

CHILDHOOD

Charles-Maurice of Talleyrand-Périgord was born in Paris on February 2, 1754.

Claiming to be a descendent of Adalbert, Count de Périgord and vassal of Hugues Capet in the year 990, he came from a family of high nobility as declared in the Royal Patent Letters of 1613 and 1735. His parents had important responsibilities in the court of Louis XV.

Due to a genetic disorder, Marfan syndrome, Talleyrand was born with a club foot. This was not the result of an accidental fall as legend (propagated by Talleyrand himself) would have it.

His future would be influenced by this infirmity.

Charles-Maurice was stripped of his birthright by his parents. As a result, he lost his title, the majority of his property, and the ability to transmit the family patrimony to his heirs. Simply put, he lost his status. It is understandable why, on the day of Mirabeau's death, Talleyrand read Mirabeau's discourse on equal distribution of wealth to direct heirs when addressing the Assembly, suggesting that the birthright be eliminated.

TALLEYRAND AND THE CHURCH

From the time he was 15, in 1769, he was pressured to enter the priesthood. The following year, he entered the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice where he showed little enthusiasm for his studies. While there, he had an affair with an actress from the Comédie Française.

In 1774, Talleyrand received his minor orders. The following year, Charles-Maurice attended the coronation of Louis XVI, at which his uncle was coadjutor to the officiating archbishop.

After completing his studies at the Sorbonne, he obtained his degree in theology, which he owed more to his name than to his efforts. As a result, he was ordained as a priest at the age of 25, in 1779.

En 1780 Talleyrand was named Agent General of the Clergy and, in his capacity as secretary, was responsible in 1785, for protecting the tax privileges of the Church faced with the financial needs of Louis XVI.

From 1783 to 1792, Talleyrand's mistress was the Countess Adelaïde de Flahaut. The couple had a child, born in 1785, whom they named Charles, after his natural father. Charles de Flahaut would later become the lover of Queen Hortense and the father of the Duke de Morny, the half-brother of Napoleon III.

THE REVOLUTIONARY YEARS

In 1788, on the eve of the Revolution, the abbot de Périgord, following his father's dying petition to Louis XVI, was named Bishop of Autun by the king. Charles-Maurice remained a little over three weeks in Autun, long enough to be elected Deputy of the Clergy to the States General.

On July 14, 1789, the Bishop of Autun was made a member of the Constitutional Committee of the National Assembly, where he played an important role presenting numerous proposals. Talleyrand was one of the signatories of the French Constitution enacted by the National Assembly and accepted by the king on September 14, 1791.

On July 14, 1790, on the Champs de Mars, Charles-Maurice celebrated mass during the Fête de la Fédération, which commemorated the anniversary of the taking of the Bastille.

Also in 1790, the Bishop played a major role in the confiscation of Church property by the Revolution. He took an oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and, though he had resigned as Bishop of Autun on January 13, 1791, in February, he appointed the first two constitutional bishops. These bishops would also be known as talleyrandiste bishops.

In 1792 the former bishop was sent on a diplomatic mission to London, charged with explaining French politics and calming the fears of the English monarchy.

EXILE

He returned to France in July, and left again for England in September, carrying a passport signed by Danton because he anticipated the Terror. Shortly afterwards, Talleyrand was indicted by the Convention and an arrest warrant was issued. Thanks to the passport signed by Danton, he was able to claim, upon his return, that he had not emigrated.

In 1794, Charles-Maurice was deported from England and went to the United States of America, where he was a real estate prospector in the forests of Massachusetts and a commodities broker. When he returned in 1796, after the Convention's arrest warrant had been lifted, he wrote an «Essay on the Benefits to be Gained from New Colonies,» which followed his «Report on American Commercial Relations with England.»

THE DIRECTOIRE

In 1797, thanks to Madame de Staël's influence with Barras, Talleyrand was named Minister of Foreign Relations for the Directoire, replacing Charles Delacroix. Was the former bishop the lover of Madame Delacroix and the father of Eugène Delacroix, the famous painter? His paternity is contested by some historians and accepted by others because of a certain resemblance. Talleyrand met Bonaparte, after he had returned victorious from the campaign in Italy and launched Talleyrand on the public scene at a reception in the salons of the Hôtel de Gallifet, the Ministry headquarters. This heralded the beginning of the end of the Directoire. He resigned from the ministry in July of 1799.

THE RISE OF BONAPARTE AND THE CONSULATE

Talleyrand greatly influenced the success of the coup d'état of the 18th of Brumaire by providing guidance to Bonaparte after the failed expedition to Egypt, of which he was one of the instigators. It was Talleyrand who made Barras resign from his position as Director and who kept the three million pounds that were to go to Barras in order to persuade him to step down without resistance. Charles-Maurice then regained his position as Minister of Foreign Relations under the Consulate. Bonaparte, named First Consul, actually managed France's foreign policy and did not allow Talleyrand to be very involved. The treaty of Mortefontaine and the negotiations (1800) and treaty of Lunéville (1801) took place without his involvement. Charles-Maurice, awed by the First Consul, allowed it to happen and even fawningly approved blatant errors.

Regarding Talleyrand's personal life, in 1801 his involvement with Madame Grand, born Worlée, became public. She would become Madame of Talleyrand-Périgord the following year. Charles-Maurice had known this pretty Frenchwoman, who had been born in the Indies, since 1798. This marriage is an enigma for historians. Given that his contemporaries were generally passionate on the subject of the beautiful Catherine, whom they described as «Beauty and the Beast rolled into one,» why did Talleyrand marry Catherine Grand after being ordered to do so by the First Consul, who had told his minister to marry her or leave her?

In 1803, Charlotte, a little girl of five with unknown parents, appeared on the scene. Talleyrand adored her, gave her the best education, and provided a dowry which enabled her to make an advantageous marriage. Charlotte might have been the daughter that Charles-Maurice had with his wife in 1798 during their ongoing affair. The law at the time forbade recognition of illegitimate children. Was Charlotte one of the reasons why Talleyrand married? It is possible.

Also in 1803, Talleyrand bought, by order of the First Consul and with his financial assistance, the château of Valençay, which was, at 12,000 hectares, one of the largest private properties in France. From 1803 forward, it was his custom to go there periodically either before or after taking a cure at the hot springs of Bourbon-l'Archambault. Talleyrand managed the property and its county seat, both of which prospered until his death in 1838.

THE AFFAIR OF THE DUC D'ENGHIEU

1804 arrived. On the 9th of March, Cadoudal, the leader of the Chouans (counter-revolutionaries), was arrested in Paris. Royalist plots were on the rise.

The Duke d'Enghien was arrested during the night of the 14th to 15th of March at Ettenheim in Baden by General Ordonner, taken to Strasbourg, and then transferred to Paris. On the 20th of March, he was tried, condemned to death, and executed in the moat of Vincennes by Savary. This arrest on foreign soil and the assassination were the work of Talleyrand. It was he who instigated it, although he did so by order of Napoleon.

As Jean Orieux said, the former bishop of Autun wanted to «put a river of blood between the Bourbons and Napoleon» because he wanted to prevent any rapprochement between the First Consul and the future Louis XVIII, which would have been highly detrimental to him. It was, therefore, out of personal interest that Talleyrand slipped in the blood of the last of the Condés. This was the greatest misdeed of his entire career. The others are insignificant. If there is anything to reprove Charles-Maurice for, it is not his treasons, or his conduct with regard to money or women, but his role in the assassination of the Duke d'Enghien.

THE EMPIRE

On July 11, 1804, Talleyrand was named Grand Chamberlain.

Charles-Maurice attended the coronation of Napoleon on December 2, 1804, a few months after the ratification of the Constitution of the year XII, which created the Empire.

In 1805, Talleyrand was in high favor, reaping the fruits of his subservience. Then, war broke out again with Austria. There was the crushing victory of Ulm followed two days later by the disaster of Trafalgar, which was compensated for by Austerlitz on December 2. Charles-Maurice sought the means to an honorable peace with Austria and Russia, but the Emperor did not listen to him. Talleyrand, against his wishes, signed the Treaty of Presbourg.

In 1806, Charles-Maurice was named Prince of Bénévent, a small principality taken from the Pope. On July 12, in Paris, the Prince of Bénévent signed the treaty that formed the Confederation of the Rhine. Talleyrand increasingly opposed Napoleon. His friendship with Dalberg, a notorious spy, allowed him to furnish information to Alexander I, tsar of Russia, through Dalberg. The Prince of Bénévent objected to the new war against Prussia even though he continued to flatter Napoleon. It can be assumed that after Presbourg, he was hiding behind a mask.

After the battle of Iéna and the taking of Berlin, the Continental Blockade was implemented. This blockade impoverished Europe and somewhat later brought third-party countries such as Spain into the war. The war with Spain would be “the beginning of the end.”

THE SPLIT

In 1807 the Prince of Bénévent, who had been living in Warsaw since December, signed, at Tilsitt, the treaty with Russia and Prussia after the taking of Warsaw and the bloody battle of Eylau. In July, Napoleon left and returned to France, preoccupied with the matter of Spain. The prince of Bénévent followed him, stopping in Dresden at the home of Frédéric-Auguste, king of Saxony. It is probably there that he decided to leave his post as Minister of Foreign Relations. As Emile Dard said, «You cannot accuse him of abandoning the Emperor in failure, he left him at the peak of his glory.» Charles-Maurice knew that he no longer had any influence over Napoleon who was turning France into a military dictatorship that would fail. He had himself named Vice Grand-Elector, thus justifying his leaving the ministry, since this responsibility was incompatible with a ministerial post.

THE SPANISH AFFAIR - THE PRINCES OF SPAIN AT VALENÇAY

In 1808, French troops entered Spain and occupied the country after many difficulties. Joseph Bonaparte secured the Spanish crown. Guerilla warfare raged after the princes of Spain were captured at Bayonne by means of a ruse of Napoleon's. He ordered, in no uncertain terms, that the princes of Spain be placed under house arrest at the château of Valençay and that Talleyrand serve as their “jailer.” Charles-Maurice acquiesced, but beneath his impassible mask, there was the rumble of revolt. The Prince of Bénévent left Valençay for Erfurt and did not see his château again until 1816. During this period, many events would change the face of the world.

THE CONFERENCE OF ERFURT

On September 27, 1808 the Conference of Erfurt opened with the meeting of Napoleon and Alexander I. For the Emperor, the objective was to prevent an alliance between Russia and Austria by reinforcing the Treaty of Tilsitt. In truth, occupied by the war in Spain, Napoleon could not afford the existence of an Austro-Russian coalition, which would open a second front. The relations of François II, Emperor of Austria, with France were at their worst, and Napoleon's plan was to create an alliance with Russia in order to partition Austria. The Corsican asked Talleyrand to convince the Tsar through numerous meetings to ally with him, but the Prince of Bénévent was on Austria's side and he did all he could to bring Alexander I and François II together. He succeeded.

For Napoleon, the Conference of Erfurt was a failure; he got nothing from the Tsar because of Talleyrand. When the conference ended on October 14, 1808, all of Europe knew it had an ally in Talleyrand who remained at the very heart of the Emperor's entourage. Thus began the undermining of the Empire.

THE «SCENE» OF JANUARY 28, 1809

When he returned from Erfurt, Talleyrand met with Fouché, Minister of Police, several times. The two men hated each other. The Prince of Bénévent could not stand the former oratorian, a regicide and Convention member who was responsible for the massacres of Lyon. They were opposites in every way; in thought and action. They came from two different worlds, but events would conspire to bring them together. They went so far as to contemplate the assassination of Napoleon.

On December 20th, 1808 Talleyrand gave a large reception. Fouché was the guest of honor. All of Europe understood that

these two men had come together in opposition to the Emperor. The Emperor, made aware of this, returned suddenly from Spain and, on January 28, 1809 at dawn, convened a select council. Talleyrand was present.

Napoleon accused the Prince of Bénévent of treason and insulted him crudely with the famous phrase «You are dung in a silk stocking» He settled for stripping him of his position of Grand Chamberlain, thus revoking his privileges of entering his cabinet at any hour.

Talleyrand then began to work openly for Austria.

TALLEYRAND AWAITS HIS HOUR

In December of 1809 Joséphine de Beauharnais, no longer able to have children, was repudiated by the Emperor. The Prince of Bénévent had the marriage of Napoleon to the Archduchess Marie-Louise of Austria approved, but did not return to favor. Talleyrand found himself confronting serious financial problems and requested financial assistance from Alexander I, who refused. Charles-Maurice had to sell the contents of his library again.

Time passed. The Emperor continued to rebuff Talleyrand, followed by attempts at reconciliation.

1812 was the year of the Russian campaign, which ended in the deadly retreat.

In 1813 the war with Spain ended. With the Treaty of Valençay of December 11, 1813, the princes of Spain regained their freedom. Talleyrand refused to return to the post of Minister of Foreign Relations.

This offer by Napoleon shows the Emperor's esteem for and recognition of Talleyrand's diplomatic skills despite his "treason."

1814 : THE YEAR OF THE END

On January 10, 1814 Napoleon made another scene with Prince of Bénévent, chastising him for things he had said in salons. This did not stop the emperor from investing him with full power to negotiate with the allies. Charles-Maurice got close to the Bourbons and became the advisor of the future Louis XVIII.

In March of 1814, enemy armies were at the gates of Paris. On the 29th, the Empress and the King of Rome left the capital. On the 31st, the allies entered the city. Talleyrand received Tsar Alexander I in his home on the rue Saint Florentin and brought Louis XVIII to the throne.

TALLEYRAND GOVERNS DESPITE OF LOUIS XVIII

On the 1st of April, 1814, the Prince of Bénévent was elected President of the Provisional Government by the Senate. On the 10th of April, the Prince of Bénévent implemented the Constitutional Charter, which would be accepted by the king despite his misgivings. Charles-Maurice met Louis XVIII upon his return from Ghent. The meeting was somewhat cool; the king's entourage was very hostile towards the former bishop.

On the 23rd of April an armistice agreement was signed between France and the allies. The country regained its borders of 1792. On May 13, Talleyrand was named Minister of Foreign Relations for the third time since the Revolution.

On May 30th, the Treaty of Paris brought an official end to the war. Two months later, negotiations would begin in Vienna towards the reconstruction of Europe from the rubble of the Empire.

On June 4th, Charles-Maurice was made peer of France. On december 6th 1814 received the title of Prince de Talleyrand.

TALLEYRAND SAVES FRANCE AT THE CONGRESS OF VIENNA

The Prince de Talleyrand left for Vienna on September 16, 1814. France's position was very delicate. It had not been admitted to the negotiating table. Thanks to his skill, Talleyrand succeeded in having France included. In Vienna, the Prince de Talleyrand was accompanied by Dorothee de Courlande, wife of his nephew, Edmond de Périgord. Dorothee would remain with the Prince until his death as his mistress and keeper of his household. Later, Dorothee would give birth to a daughter named Pauline, whom Talleyrand treated like his own. There are those who believe he was her father, but there is no real proof.

Prussia and Russia wanted to partition Europe, by annexing Saxony and Poland. The project failed after opposition by Metternich and Charles-Maurice. Talleyrand was so successful that England, France, and Austria signed, in great secrecy, a treaty of alliance against Prussia and Russia on January 3, 1815. However, London allowed Prussia to annex the Rhineland, which brought the Prussians to within 220 kilometers of Paris.

On February 26, 1815, Napoleon left Elba and headed for France on the Inconstant with 900 men. It is likely that this "escape" took place with the complicity of England, although that remains unproven.

On June 4, Bénévent went to the Holy See.

On June 9, Talleyrand signed the final act of the Congress of Vienna. On the 18th, the battle of Waterloo took place, and the Hundred Days came to an end.

THE SECOND RESTORATION

In Paris, which Napoleon had left on June 29, anger was growing. There was a risk of rioting and civil war.

On July 9, the Prince de Talleyrand was named President of the Counsel of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs. He named Fouché Minister of Police to maintain order in Paris.

But the situation was worsening in France; the ultra-royalists were carrying out the White Terror in the provinces and the occupation armies were committing atrocities. Minister Talleyrand noticeably lacked enthusiasm for his work. The demands of the allies were extravagant; they wanted France to pay for their support to Napoleon during the Hundred Days. On the 24th of September, Talleyrand, powerless and refusing to negotiate on the terms imposed by the allies, was forced to resign by Louis XVIII, who named him Grand Chamberlain. Therefore, he did not sign the second Treaty of Paris.

THE POLITICAL RETREAT OF THE PRINCE OF TALLEYRAND

Richelieu replaced Talleyrand as President of the Counsel of Ministers.

Charles-Maurice, embittered, took the floor several times in the House of Peers to criticize the government. He attended, as Grand Chamberlain, the marriage of the Duke de Berry, second in line to the throne of France, who was assassinated a few years later.

In 1816, Talleyrand separated from his wife by exiling her temporarily to London. He continued to malign Richelieu, particularly during a soirée at the embassy of England, and was forbidden by Louis XVIII to appear at the Tuileries for a long time.

On August 31, 1817, Talleyrand was raised to the rank of duke and on the 2nd of the following December, Ferdinand, King of Naples, granted him the title of Duke de Dino, which was immediately transmitted to his nephew Edmond, which made Dorothee the duchess de Dino. It is by this name that she is remembered in history.

Years passed. With every change of cabinet, Talleyrand hoped in vain to return to favor. The ultra-royalist court wanted nothing to do with him.

On July 24, 1821, during an address to the House of Peers, Talleyrand praised freedom of the press and expressed his opposition to censorship.

In 1823, Savary, Duke de Rovigo and Napoleon's former minister of Police published a pamphlet implicating Talleyrand in the assassination of the Duke d'Enghien. However, after intervention by Louis XVIII, Charles-Maurice was not pursued. In September of 1824, Louis XVIII died. Charles X replaced him and was crowned on May 29, 1825, at Reims. Talleyrand's situation did not improve. He spent time at Valençay and at Bourbon-l'Archambault. There were many deaths among the Prince's entourage.

The ultra-royalists had Charles X under their influence. Minister Villèle proposed many reactionary measures, such as laws concerning sacrilege, anti-immigration laws, and an attempt to reestablish the birthright. Minister Martignac tried to impose a more liberal policy but he was replaced in 1829 by Minister Polignac. This was a triumph for the ultra-royalists. The government was very unpopular.

THE JULY REVOLUTION OF 1830

The liberals turned to the Duke of Orléans. Charles X, badly advised by Polignac, made the error of publishing the four Royal Orders that were to unleash the insurrection of July 27, 28, and 29, known as the "Three Glorious Days." Paris rose up. The insurgents triumphed. Charles X left for England. Louis-Philippe took power from the balcony of the Hôtel de Ville, brandishing the tricolor flag to the cheers of the crowd. Thus he became "King of the French" and adopted a more liberal charter.

PRINCE OF TALLEYRAND COMES OUT OF RETIREMENT AND RETURNS TO LONDON

The insurrection in the streets of Paris brought back bad memories to the capitals of Europe, which were anxious about the liberals taking power by force. Louis-Philippe, very intelligently, managed to convince the Prince de Talleyrand, who was 76 years old, to accept the post of ambassador to London. This nomination reassured the capitals at the time when the Belgians were revolting against the Dutch to claim their independence.

On September 25, 1830, the Prince de Talleyrand left for London where he was very well received by the English court.

TALLEYRAND AND BELGIAN INDEPENDENCE

Belgium had been under the control of Holland since the Congress of Vienna. Belgian independence destroyed the balance created during the Congress of 1815 and caused concern in Prussia and England, which feared that France might annex Belgium, which was the wish of some Belgians.

Talleyrand convinced Wellington that France would not intervene. They organized the Conference of London to resolve the Belgian question. The conference opened on November 4, 1830, with the cessation of hostilities between the Dutch army and the insurgents. This amounted to recognizing Belgium as an independent state.

Prince Leopold of Saxe-Cobourg was elected king of Belgium by the Congress on June 4, 1831 and, after some difficulties, the treaty ratifying independence was signed on November 15, 1831. The king of Holland, William I, left Antwerp on December 23, 1832.

Talleyrand worked to bring England and France closer together until the end of his ambassadorship in August, 1834 with the signature of the treaty of the Quadruple Alliance between Spain, Portugal, England, and France on April 22, 1834.

TALLEYRAND LEAVES POLITICS PERMANENTLY

Talleyrand, having returned to France, was overwhelmed with criticism by legitimists and the republicans, despite the fact that, for four years in London, he had reinforced the position of France by obtaining the support of England and weakening the Holy Alliance among Prussia, Austria, and Russia. He retained the confidence of Louis-Philippe.

Talleyrand retired to Valençay, accompanied by the Duchess de Dino. He spent his latter years on his estate among the 10,000 works of his library. He finished writing his memoirs and every winter returned to his home on the rue Saint-Florentin.

The Princess of Talleyrand died in Paris on December 10, 1835. Talleyrand was no longer married!

THE CONVERSION AND DEATH OF THE PRINCE DUKE OF TALLEYRAND

In 1837, Talleyrand wrote a new will and left Valençay in autumn, never to return.

On March 3, 1838, the Prince de Talleyrand made a last public appearance before the Royal Institute of France, delivering a speech in praise of the Count de Reinhard.

Charles-Maurice wanted his long life to end honorably. He had to rectify his dispute with the Church. Considered an apostate bishop in the eyes of Rome, if he did not make honorable amends, Talleyrand would not have a church burial.

His niece, Dorothee, made arrangements with the Archbishop de Quelen and abbot Dupanloup to obtain a public letter of retraction from the Prince in which he would acknowledge his past mistakes. He spent the last two months of his life negotiating and refining the contents of this letter. This was the last act of Talleyrand's life.

On May 17, 1838, he was dying. At 6:00 in the morning, Talleyrand finally signed his letter of retraction, accompanied by a letter to Pope Gregory XVI. At 8:00, Louis-Philippe, accompanied by his sister, Madame Adelaide, came to visit him for a last good-bye. The king knew that he owed his throne to the Prince and thus paid him the highest tribute. At the end of the morning, abbot Dupanloup received his confession. Talleyrand passed away at 3:35 in the afternoon of that day.

On May 22, official and religious funeral services were held. On September 5, he was buried at Valençay in a chapel near the chateau.

CONCLUSION

So ended the life of the most illustrious diplomat France has ever known. This man, who never ceased to provoke hate and controversy, spent his life loving France and defending it with all of his strength during the most troubled period of its history. A European before his time, seeking to develop trade, peace, and education, Charles-Maurice of Talleyrand-Périgord, who prized the values of the Old Regime, was in fact a modern man, always turned towards the future. That is the least of his contradictions.

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