

Notre Dame is the historical and cultural centre of a great nation

It was saddening and even terrifying to see so much of a splendid building that has endured 856 years consumed in flames

by Conrad Black



Next to St. Peter's Basilica and the Palace of Versailles, Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris is probably the most eminent building in all Europe, and of course, is older than the first two. It was saddening and even terrifying to see so much of a splendid building that has endured 856 years consumed in flames. It was the sort of destruction people can accept more easily in the midst of a total war, as in the destruction of the British Parliament buildings and serious damage to St. Paul's Cathedral in the Second World War. France is not a strongly practicing Catholic country, but Roman Catholicism is

upheld by influential and intellectually respectable elements of French society, and the Catholic personality of the country and its history is appreciated by everyone except the far left. The Gallican French Church can assimilate all the vagaries of human nature; it is the ultimate worldly church. Some of its 20th-century theologians, such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jacques Maritain, were among the most influential in the world. And Notre Dame, beyond all other buildings in Europe, has been in the seminal moments of the history of Europe through most of the Middle Ages, and through all the complexities of the history of France as one of the world's greatest nation states, which it remains.

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When Henry IV won the civil war and in order to unite the country under him, became a Roman Catholic (famously saying: "Paris is worth a mass") it was in Notre Dame that the mass occurred. All the kings of France from Philip Augustus in the 12th century were frequent communicants here. The cathedral was substantially vandalized by Jacobin extremists during the Terror in the French Revolution. Napoleon founded the First Empire in Notre Dame, when, in emulation of Charlemagne, he took the crown from Pope Pius VII and crowned himself. In the Paris Commune of 1871, there was more vandalism, yet the most important relics, including, it is claimed and believed, the original crown of thorns, survived, and survived the fire this week. Of the six cardinal-archbishops of Paris between the French Revolution in 1789 and the founding of the Third Republic in 1871, two died naturally and received solemn princely funerals in Notre Dame, two fled for their lives, and two were murdered. The great cathedral has been the serene witness of much upheaval.



A photo taken on April 16, 2019, shows the interior of Notre Dame in the aftermath of a fire that devastated the Paris

cathedral. AFP/Getty Images

Cardinal Richelieu held the service of thanksgiving for the deliverance of the King, Louis XIII and himself, from a plot by the king's brother, at Notre Dame in 1642. Three hundred years later, when Charles de Gaulle returned to liberated Paris on Aug. 26, 1944, and walked down the Champs Élysées from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde, cheered by two million Parisians, he then went in an open car to a Liberation service in Notre Dame, where bullets ricocheted in the rafters, presumed to be German snipers, though de Gaulle dismissed it as trigger-happy celebration. Victor Hugo, generally reckoned to be the greatest figure in French literature, popularized Notre Dame with the story of the hunchback, memorably portrayed in film by Charles Laughton. A plaque on the floor of Notre Dame records the exact place where the famous turn-of-the-century writer Paul Claudel embraced Catholicism. The great 16th-century bell Emmanuel, rung on the greatest and darkest occasions, including the end of the World Wars and the terrorist attack on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, survived the fire, as did the principal stained-glass windows and the giant organ of 8,000 pipes, a mechanical and musical wonder. All road mileage estimates of distance from Paris have always begun at the square in front of Notre Dame.



French officials gather outside Notre Dame cathedral after a ceremony at the city town hall on April 18, 2019 in Paris. Michel Euler/AP

The fall of the 19th-century steeple will be one of the epochal photographs of this time. What is most striking about this fire is that one of the most famous, imposing and culturally important buildings in the world for 856 years, whose presence was constant and was always assumed, should suddenly be consumed in flames in one otherwise peaceful evening. It is a startling reminder of the fragility of even the greatest and most timeless functioning monuments. The Great Pyramid of Giza and the Great Wall of China do not

qualify, as nothing happens inside them. The Parthenon is older, but is partly a ruin, has not had any religious significance for nearly 2,000 years, and is not now in one of the world's most important cities. The destruction of the World Trade Centers in 2001 was much more horrifying because of the suicidal violence and the tragic loss of thousands of lives. But the buildings themselves, though famous, imposing and graceful, had not accumulated any timeless quality or a rich history.



The Notre Dame steeple collapses as the cathedral is engulfed in flames in central Paris on April 15, 2019. Geoffroy Van Der Hasselt/AFP/Getty Images

In terms of a conflagration of historic significance, the fire in Notre Dame Cathedral was the most shocking and consequential of modern times. Since it occurred, there have been many comparisons, including to the less destructive fire at Windsor Castle about 20 years ago. The White House was largely burned out by a British shore party during the War of 1812, but it was then a new building, and the interior was rebuilt and the outer walls whitewashed – hence the name.

I see the Notre Dame fire as the sad bookend to the burning of the most magnificent ship in history, also French, the Normandie, in New York harbour in 1942. The Normandie was long ahead of its time, with very uncluttered decks, clean graceful lines, electric turbine engines, and the most magnificent public rooms any ship has ever had, and fitted out in a way that made decorative history, to the point that any relic of the Normandie, even a stateroom telephone, has considerable value today. She was the pride of France, the embodiment of French science, culture, elegance, and style, and she met an ignominious end when acetylene torches being used to convert the ship to carry soldiers rather than passengers started a fire. (Something similar may have been the start of the Notre Dame fire.) The New York fire department deluged the upper decks with so much water that the ship capsized. At least the

Notre Dame fire was a horrible but in its way majestic spectacle. For the world's greatest ship to heel over like a dying whale in the polluted and icy waters of the lower Hudson because of the errors of a municipal fire department was a spontaneous act of nihilism, somewhat indicative of the prostrate condition of Nazi-occupied and collaborationist France at the time. It was regrettable that president Roosevelt was persuaded for reasons of cost not to follow up on his wish to salvage and restore the great ship.



French President Emmanuel Macron and the audience stand guard at the Elysee presidential Palace in Paris on April 18, 2019, during a tribute ceremony to firefighters and other emergency workers who saved Notre Dame Cathedral in the devastating blaze three days prior. Christophe Petit Tesson/AFP/Getty Images

President Emmanuel Macron has pledged that the cathedral will be rebuilt, and we can be sure that the French will do so in the highest taste and fidelity to the original. After one day, \$700 million had been pledged by donors. The walls and towers and much else has survived. But it was a very sad and sobering moment, for every thoughtful person, regardless of faith or nationality.