



France Under Occupation: Memory, Myth, and Misogyny

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“There are, in the life of a nation, moments that wound its memory as well as the idea that one has of one’s country...all French citizens – must ‘recognize the mistakes of the past...’”

– President Jacques Chirac, July 1995.

“What was true of Faulkner’s South is no less true in Hollande’s France.

The past is not dead; it’s not even past.” – Robert Zaretsky



Memory is a social construct. Societies “remember” the past through the lens of cultural needs and motives. It is difficult to confront traumatic history, but we must ask difficult questions of the past. For the first twenty-five years after liberation, France’s wartime history was remembered as General de Gaulle as the “sword” liberating France and Marshal Pétain as the “shield” protecting France from the worst of the Nazi occupation. He “endured” became the symbol of the French experience. Out of necessity, this is reductionist history. For France, confronting the shock of its military collapse and the collaboration and guilt of Vichy is difficult and crucial. Why did de Gaulle claim in his radio speech of August 25, 1944, that France had “liberated itself” (with a particular focus on masculinity) and that all, except for “a handful of scoundrels,” were resisters despite the evidence to the contrary? How and why was this myth constructed and for a short time, accepted? Which conflicts in French society shaped and continue to shape the historical narrative? We should be careful in judging France out of context. France was no better and no worse than other Western European nations under the harsh realities of occupation. The legal frameworks of human rights, genocide, and the protection of minority rights were postwar phenomenon. Americans faced issues of segregation, violence towards minorities, antisemitism, and disenfranchisement during the same period. Americans must be cautious about moralizing about French behaviors and instead explore the dangers in accepting myths and simple explanations that tend to distance ourselves from responsibility. This essay seeks to explore the experience of the French during World War II, how its fascist movement differed from Nazi Germany, the construction of memory, and the challenges and responsibilities that lie ahead.

France Between the Wars

Post-World War I politics in France was marked by ongoing polarization between Right and Left. Political consensus was subordinated to ideological divides that resembled civil war more than civil discourse. To oversimplify, the secular Left battled the religious Right for the soul of France. The Left was deeply rooted in the French Revolution whose contemporary political expression was socialism. On July 14, 1889, at the Socialist International which gathered European socialist and labor parties Paris, May 1 was designated as International Workers’ Day and a basic principle of fighting for eight-hour workday was declared. However, the demand that all parties put allegiance to international working class above country splintered the movement and patriotic, nationalist socialist groups split off. These groups drifted to the right and retained the violence practices learned from the left. Soon, conservatives (who hated the Republic) merged with these socialist nationalists (who wanted to reform/reshape the Republic). The Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906) pitted these nationalist conservative groups (now aligned with the Catholic Church) against the left. The right was able to utilize the antisemitism from the Dreyfus accusation to appropriate French nationalism from the left. The new emerging nationalism from the right was chauvinistic, antisemitic, xenophobic, anti-Protestant and anti-Masonic. French “fascism” that emerged in the 1930s was homegrown.

In 1933, *Solidarité Française* was founded with its blue-shirted minions fighting liberal government and Freemasonry. *Action Française*, originally formed in 1899 in reaction to the left-wing intellectual support of Alfred Dreyfus, were monarchists allied with the Catholic Church. *Action Française* are still active in France today. In the interwar period, their connection with the Church became frayed. The *Croix-de-Feu* (Cross of Fire), founded in 1927, was a paramilitary group of veterans led by Colonel François de la Rocque. Their slogan of “Work, Family, Fatherland” would later be adopted by the Vichy government. Although fond of parades, mass rallies, and violence, la Rocque rejected the extreme violence of other right-wing groups. On February 6, 1934, these groups, along with pro-fascist (Mussolini) groups, were part of the far-Right

leagues' riot against Third Republic. It was uncoordinated, with no clear objectives, and was crushed by the police. The left reacted strongly, fearing that it was a fascist coup – although there was little evidence they had thought that far ahead.

This was a significant moment as fascism and authoritarianism was taking hold in Europe. Unlike Germany, the French Left came together and using Great War slogans such as “They will not prevail!” unified and launched the largest counter-protest in French history on February 6, 1936. With no cult of death (Nazi fixation on martyrs) or the victimhood narrative of “betrayal” in 1918, the Left was able to mix fun and celebration into their rallies. In 1934-36, 55% of Parisians demonstrated in favor of the Third Republic while 83% demonstrated in favor in the countryside. Again, this was in stark contrast the fascism in Germany both in terms of where fascism was rejected and how the Left in France rallied to the Republic. Indeed, la Rocque of the *Croix-de-Feu*, defended the right of the Republic to exist after the failed riot. With uneasy cooperation, the Left formed the Popular Front (FFP) and elected Léon Blum as France’s first Socialist premier. Blum, a French Jew, would lead France’s FFP government in 1936-1937. France and Spain formed popular front government coalitions of working-class and middle-class parties united for the defense of democratic forms against fascism. The FFP implementing an extensive program of social reform, including higher wages, empowering of unions, and the institution of the 40-hour workweek. The FFP welcomed refugees and a wave of eastern European Jews entered France (especially Paris). Welcomed, safe, and thriving, they created a new Yiddish-French identity. One in ten Parisians were foreign born. French Communists fought fascists in Spain. France became the most hospitable country to immigrants and, as an influencer of western European politics, held fascism in check in Holland and Belgium.



When the Popular Front banned many Right-wing groups, they radicalized. By the mid-1930s *Mouvement Social Français* had more members than the Socialist and Communist parties combined. They mobilized proportionally more citizens in France after 1936 than the Nazis had in Germany before 1933. They mostly worked through intellectual circles and in writing as they, and the French Right, were never comfortable with the paganistic violence of the Nazis. In February 1936, they assaulted Léon Blum, the Popular Front (FFP) premier. Supported by high ranking military leaders, Mussolini and Franco, they carried out assassinations and bombings and tried to implicate the Communists. They blamed the rising political violence (that they instigated) on the Left and claimed the government was seeking to suppress their democratic liberty. In comparison to the Nazis, French fascism was generally more theatrical than dangerous.



Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia pavilions.

In 1937, Paris hosted the World’s Fair. It was hoped that the Fair would unify a France divided by politics and resentments between the countryside and Paris, and spark both employment and the arts. The theme, "International Exposition of Arts and Technics in Modern Life" would highlight the utility of art and science to help humanity while promoting Peace and Progress. Paris would be the arbiter of conflicting ideas; a safe, pluralistic space where Nazism, Communism, and representative democracy could coexist. France, and especially Paris, would fulfill its perceived role as a bastion of European culture.

Although the socio-economic reforms of the FFP perhaps buffered France against conditions that made fascism appealing elsewhere, the financial situation deteriorated, and Blum was replaced. The French Popular Front had done little in the international arena to stop the march of fascism. The new, conservative government sought to undo the gains of the Left and were suspicious of their political agenda. Édouard Daladier was elected as the center-left premier of France and rolled back many of the progressive accomplishments by decree. He pursued an aggressive anti-Communist policy and began to speak to French nationalists who wanted the flow of immigrants stopped.

Approaching War

World War I shaped the imaginations of the generation confronting the Nazi threat. France still bore its physical and psychological scars. The war and its memory were something visceral and real. By 1918, half of all the men in France aged

15-30 had been casualties. 27% of men aged 18-27 had died. The war had produced 600,000 widows, 760,000 orphans, and 1.3 million grieving parents.¹ Antisemitism also marked the French military and postwar politics. Despite the Right's belief that Jews were disloyal, of a population of 190,000 in 1914, 32,000 French Jews were mobilized and 6,500 died (1 in 5 in comparison to the 1 in 6.5 for the French).² By 1939, 40% of the French army were World War I veterans. In the interwar years, France debated what it meant "to be French" in fluid times. Many Jewish refugees who had fled to Paris (considered the land of asylum and freedom especially during the time of the Popular Front government) broadened the idea of French identity by embracing French civic and secular ideals while remaining culturally Jewish.

In September 1938, the Western powers felt that they had saved Europe from another world war with the Munich Pact which had awarded Hitler the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. at Munich was uneasy returning to the adoring crowds in Paris after the Accord: "The imbeciles – if only they knew what they were doing."³ Daladier was uneasy about facing the Nazi threat alone and acquiesced to British PM Chamberlain's demand to appease Hitler. Daladier had also been informed by the French military that they were not ready to fight. The French military had only planned for total mobilization, were unable (or unwilling) to respond on a smaller scale, and feared that mobilization might spark a pacifist backlash. British and French military planners had been awed by the Luftwaffe's displays of power and overestimated it. The French Left, made up of communists who had fought Franco and the fascists in Spain, were horrified at this "appeasement." Léon Blum, who had entered politics because of the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906), reacted to French enthusiasm as "cowardly relief."⁴ The French decision alienated the Soviet Union. Daladier had bought the French time (which they would use for a massive military buildup), but had allowed Hitler's underequipped military to seize the Czech tanks and resources that would later be utilized in the attack on France in 1940.

The divisions within French society revealed by the Dreyfus Affair were still evident in the Third Republic. Captain Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935) was a French Jewish military officer who was wrongfully tried and convicted for treason against France in 1894. Conservative forces within France (mainly the Army and the Catholic Church) condemned Dreyfus while the Left protested his innocence and rejected the obvious antisemitism being mobilized. Although Dreyfus was eventually exonerated in 1906, his trial had split the country virtually in half. The trial spurred Theodor Herzl to write *The Jewish State* in 1896 and convene the first World Zionist Congress in 1897. There was little trust between the Left and the Right as France faced the threat of Nazi Germany. Even so, after the Munich Accord, 70% of the French were in favor of resisting Nazi Germany and supported the military buildup.⁵



Stalin and Hitler agreeing to divide Poland. Source unknown.

On August 23, 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact. The Pact was more of a tacit alliance as the Soviets began to supply the Germans with desperately needed raw materials. This reinforced French prejudice and distrust against the Left, which had been steadfast in its resistance to fascism. As war now seemed imminent, the French government "preemptively" arrested French Communists as well as refugees from Spain, Germany, and Austria who had fled to France. The French government hoped that a quasi-peace could be maintained and feared that communists would push them into war to defend Poland. French police interned people in camps like Vernet-d'Ariège and Angeles-sur-Mer which had begun as camps for Spanish refugees and later converted into internment camps for 'undesirable foreigners'. In March 1940, an antisemitic crackdown reinforced the divisions in France.

France Falls, 1940

As the war approached, France took solace in and tried to hide its divisions with the 150th anniversary Bastille Day parade of July 14, 1939. Units from the Maginot Line and colonial troops marched in Paris as French planes joined the RAF flying in the skies overhead.

¹ Thomas Christofferson and Michael Christofferson. *France During World War II: From Defeat to Liberation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 2.

² Fritzsche, 317.

³ David Drake. *Paris at War*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 8.

⁴ Ibid. 7.

⁵ Christofferson. *France During World War II*, 16.

When the European war began on September 1, 1939, with the German invasion of Poland, a subdued France went to war with a sense of resentment, resignation, but confidence in its vaunted military. The Polish invasion had caused innumerable problems for the German military. Only 16 of 135 German divisions that invaded Poland were mechanized. As Germany was never able to effectively mass-produce for the war effort, the German military relied and was often pushed to secure war material through conquest. The Poles had fought bravely and their artillery had inflicted significant damage to German mechanized formations. Additionally, *Wehrmacht* conflicts with the SS (with their goals for demographic engineering in the East) had left Poland a shambles. In the confusion, the army was also committing atrocities. The army was, however, successful in forcing Himmler's first Einsatzgruppen (special task force/mobile killing unit) out of Poland.

The Germans deployed their best divisions in Poland and left only 33 relatively weak divisions with almost no tank or air support deployed on the Western Front. The French had 70 divisions with 3,000 tanks and enough air support to make significant, if not debilitating attacks into Germany.⁶ At the end of the Polish campaign, the Germans had only about six weeks of oil reserves left and their planes were in no condition to fight in the west. The unimaginative and incompetent French General Gamelin sat, did little, and missed a tremendous opportunity. Daladier could not articulate any war aims and heavily censored public information. Daladier opposed a British plan to drop mines in the Rhine River fearing that the Germans would bomb Paris. The memory of the Nazi bombing of Guernica in Spain created a visceral fear. Morale and discipline plummeted as Gamelin left the initiative to the Germans and prepared for a repeat of World War I. A brief foray into German on September 7-16, 1939 (known as the Saar "Offensive") met no German resistance, made quick advances, but then was halted and the troops returned to defensive positions. An opportunity was missed to exploit the exposed German left flank. Instead, Gamelin settled for a defensive war of attrition believing that the French had superior resources and were well prepared. As morale fell, PM Daladier tried to shore up support by initiating an anti-communist campaign in France and offering support to Finland in its war with the Soviet Union. In March 1940, Reynaud replaced Daladier as PM. Revealing the divisions and paralysis of the government, he was elected by a majority of one vote. A "Phony War" followed where the French armies refused to mount any sustained attacks as the Germans recovered and produced more tanks (although inferior) and planes than the French.

What followed was dumb luck. Hitler had no plans in place about what to do after the invasion of Poland. He had not even focused the economy or military production towards a prolonged war. Feeling exuberant with the victory in Poland, he ordered the attack of France for November 1939. Some German generals, who were fed up with Hitler and beginning to plot his assassination, were now tasked with coming up with an operational plan to shift the army west in a very condensed timetable. Working around the clock all they could muster was a replay of the World War I Schlieffen plan designed to sweep through Belgium and behind Paris trapping the French in a pincer movement. It had failed in World War I, partly due to the lack of manpower, and had little chance of succeeding in 1939. The German army itself reported that it was undermanned, undertrained, and lacking resources. This report, combined with the attack plans falling into the hands of the French in January 1940 when a German military plane crashed in Belgium in a snowstorm, convinced Hitler to postpone until spring. Remarkably, the French used the captured German plans to reinforce their strategic view that they must stop any German advance by moving their troops forward into Belgium at the outbreak of war. French leadership never imagined that the Germans might change their plans.

Hitler was saved from his own incompetence. The French had tremendous prospects of defeating the original German plan and German generals would most likely have acted to oust the incompetent Hitler after the defeat. However, in the interim, a new plan was proposed to Hitler. Its audacity appealed to Hitler, a gambler at heart, and he approved of the new plan on a whim. Using the limited German resources, the German army would launch the expected attack into Belgium, but an armored thrust would follow in the Ardennes forest and race behind the enemy's line (whom they correctly assumed would push into Belgium) and race to the channel ports before German resources ran out. The Germans were going to risk it all and utilize their ten panzer divisions (not attached to the infantry) to thrust through four roads in the Ardennes to rush to the join a feint of German forces through the Low Countries and cut off the Allied armies.

⁶ Ibid, 21.

Meanwhile, Gamelin reassured by the captured German plans, planned to invade Belgium with seven motorized infantry divisions when the Germans attacked. French tanks, superior to the Germans (integrated into the infantry divisions rather than formed as mass, independent units) were to be utilized to fight a defensive war of attrition once they arrived in Belgium. The “Escaut Plan,” formed in January 1940, was opposed by Gamelin’s own staff, but envisioned the Maginot Line acting as a buffer to channel German forces into Belgium. However, with no reserves over a 500-mile front, French tanks used only to support the infantry (radios were forbidden in the tanks), a plan for total command and control from the rear, and little if any communication with the generals in Paris, the French military was marching into a trap. Gamelin was to lead the French army by consulting only a few colleagues, never visiting the front, and issuing decrees without



Bastille Day, 1939. A confident and well-equipped French Army parades in Paris.

consulting front line officers.

Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain had vetoed extension of the Maginot Line to Belgium arguing that the Ardennes was impenetrable. For some reason he ignored the fact that French tanks held successful maneuvers there in 1939. Gamelin received reliable reports of a possible German attack through the Ardennes as early as April 2, 1940, but the French General Staff did not take it seriously. The French refused to use air reconnaissance over Germany and therefore missed the eight military bridges being built across the Rhine and the three armored columns that stretched 100 miles. On May 8, 1940, a French propaganda plane did spot a 60-mile long German armored column heading for the Ardennes with their lights on. The report was dismissed. When the Germans did attack, a handful of French bombers could have stalled the Germans as the *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force) was deployed almost exclusively in the Low Countries.⁷

The German attack began on May 10, 1940. Although French, British, and Belgian troops fought fiercely and were more than a match for the Germans in Belgium, the German armored thrust from the Ardennes forced a hasty, disorganized, exhausting, and demoralizing retreat among the poorly equipped and trained French units stationed there. German tanks even fueled up (lacking oil reserves) at French filling stations along unmined roads that had not even been sighted by artillery. *Luftwaffe* units, especially the Stuka dive-bombers, faced little opposition and wrought terror amongst the disintegrating French formations. Movement was hampered by an estimated 12 million refugees.

Even so, with a 200-mile long and 20-mile wide German front, German tanks began to break down and outrun their infantry and support columns in the rear. Hitler panicked and ordered two halts as the exhausted Germans worked to repair their tanks. At that moment, Gamelin finally realized his opportunity to attack the vulnerable German left flank. Although, stunningly, the French had no strategic reserve, three French heavily armored divisions counter-attacked with some initial success. However, each division was delayed for a variety of reasons, did not attack in unison, and lacked fuel and air cover. A British attack supported by French tanks on German General Rommel’s troops was initially successful, but not exploited due to distrust between the French and British.

Just as Gamelin began to plan a counterattack, Paul Reynaud, the French premier, replaced Daladier as Minister of Defense. On the next day, May 19, he replaced Gamelin with General Weygand. Weygand, called out of retirement, had never commanded troops in battle. He distrusted the British and in his early career had given money to Dreyfus’ accuser in 1894. Weygand promptly cancelled the counter-attack that Gamelin had planned and instead spent the next two days visiting with foreign dignitaries in Paris. He canceled Gamelin’s attack and ordered his troops to simply stay put. Weygand flew to Ypres to consult with the British General Gort, but could not find him as Gort had never been informed about the meeting. Those 48 hours allowed German infantry to catch up with their over-extended tanks, ending any chance France had of a successful counter-offensive. When Weygand finally launched an attack, it was too late. French forces now fought fruitless, piecemeal attacks and Weygand became overwhelmed by defeatism. He ordered Paris left undefended, advocated for surrender, and became an ambivalent Nazi collaborator.

⁷ Christofferson, 27.

Some French units continued to fight fiercely while others remained static and confused. One estimate revealed that 800,000 men remained in their barracks without any weapons. Many weapons stored in depots were never used. Operation Dynamo (May 27-June 4) rescued 338,000 troops (112,000 were French) at Dunkirk. While the German High Command under General Halder wanted to crush the BEF at Dunkirk, Hitler, who disliked Halder, sided with General Rundstedt who wanted to consolidate his panzer units for the future campaign in France. While French units fought the rearguard action that made the escape possible, Weygand, knowing about the operation for six days, had never bothered to tell his commanders, and complained that the British were leaving French troops behind. 40,000 other troops escaped from Channel ports back to Britain. Although French planes outnumbered the Germans 3,287 to 2,670 only one third of French planes ever saw action.⁸

On June 3, Paris was bombed. Fearing another Warsaw, General Weygand announced that Paris was to be an open city and would not be defended. This came as a tremendous shock to Parisians who thought they were winning the war due to the strict censorship of news from the front. Almost four million fled the city.⁹ Abandoning Paris was seen as a humiliating betrayal. Ironically, the French police mostly remained on duty as they sought to protect the city from lawlessness and chaos.¹⁰

The average French soldier had fought well (including action against the Italians who entered reluctantly at the tail end of the Battle for France). The French had won the largest tank battle of the campaign and had outclassed the Germans in the field who had tellingly been relying on horses. France had been betrayed, not by its troops, but by its political and military leadership that had proven inept and incompetent. In the trauma that followed, these same leaders would blame the decadence and “moral rot” of the Third French Republic for their failures. This included blaming the “modern woman” (who had found some independence during the war working in industry while their husbands were away) for the low birthrate and all the perceived evils of modern society. These women were perceived as having not “sacrificed” enough. This echoed the experience of Nazi Germany.

Armistice and Collaboration

When the French military and political leadership collapsed in June 1940, France was stunned. The sense of shock cannot be overstated both in France and abroad. French military incompetence was masked through strict control of the French media. Paul Reynaud, opposed to an armistice and feeling he lacked sufficient cabinet support for continuing the war, resigned as Prime Minister. The deeply respected WW 1 hero Philippe Pétain formed a new government and sought an armistice as the only honorable way for France to survive. The next day, June 17, 1940, Marshal Pétain, attempting to save



British cartoonist Leslie Gilbert Lingworm.

what was left of the army, gave a radio address that halted French forces in the field. Pétain’s right-wing paranoia had falsely convinced him that a communist rebellion was about to take place in Paris similar to the Paris Commune of 1870. Regardless of motive, one million soldiers were captured in the next five days before an armistice was signed. Many soldiers had not even seen action and some had gone home. Two million French soldiers were taken prisoner. 1,500-3,000 black French colonial troops who were taken prisoner were massacred by the German army.¹¹

The Armistice, proposed by French leaders, was signed on June 22, 1940. The Armistice indicated that the Germans intended the racial order in Germany to spread to France. France was forced to repatriate refugees and all German nationals designated by the Reich. As part of the agreement, France (soon Vichy) had to pay the

⁸ Ronald Rosbottom. *When Paris Went Dark: The Coty of Light Under German Occupation, 1940-1944* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2014), 34.

⁹ Ibid. 34.

¹⁰ Ibid, 50.

¹¹ The Nazis had built on the tradition of targeting the “Rhineland Bastards” after World War I as an attack on the “Aryan race.” Targeting of French colonial troops also built upon Field Marshal’s Hindenburg’s belief, stated in his diary in 1916, that France was muddying the ability to test German racial supremacy by utilizing black troops.

costs of the German occupation in the north on a weekly basis. In the confusion and shock that followed, the Catholic Church supported the armistice. Cardinal Suhard recommended that France “remain calm, work, and pray.”¹² Cardinal Claudel, a right-wing diplomat, dramatist, poet, and author, welcomed the collapse of the “obnoxious parliamentary regime (Third Republic) that has been destroying France.”¹³ This conservative view shaped what would become Vichy France.

Vichy France and the Revenge of the Conservative Catholic Church

Vichy grew out of the armistice agreement with Germany. Germany welcomed French cooperation as a solution to their strained resources and lack of manpower. Vichy was a small town in south central France and became the new capital of the French government. France was divided into occupied and unoccupied zones. Pierre Laval became the main architect of the Vichy regime, which, on paper, would control the unoccupied zone. On July 10, 1940, Laval persuaded the National Assembly (summoned at Vichy to ratify the armistice) to grant Pétain authority to create a new constitution. In a sign of the incompetency to come, the constitution was never finalized. Pétain became the head of the Vichy state and Laval became its Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Although based in Vichy (Hitler refused continually request by Pétain to relocate to Paris or Versailles), its laws would apply to occupied France. Although officially neutral, Vichy collaborated with Germany. Vichy never became a cohesive or effective government.



Vichy was a reactionary military movement blaming the ills of France on Jews, modernity, and the Enlightenment and not the failure of the military elite. This was an echo from post-World War I Germany. Pétain argued for “an intellectual and moral revival”¹⁴ of the French nation. In his view, the nation had been corrupted by the liberal



Pétain and Laval.

Third Republic. Immediately Vichy attacked the Third Republic’s initiatives such as egalitarian, universal public education (free secondary education was ended), the welcoming of refugees to shore up the work force, and ideals of tolerance. Unions were dissolved and single party rule was introduced. Vichy would institute a nationalist and “pre-Revolutionary” agenda focused, like the Nazis, on undermining the ideals of the Enlightenment and return France to a mythical countryside past rooted in patriarchy. Vichy’s motto of “work, family, and country” replaced the revolutionary ideals of “life, liberty, and brotherhood.” Sacrifice would replace the perceived individual pleasure-seekers (specific focus on “modern women”) of the Third Republic and reinstitute a hierarchy of male, elitist power. Pétain would seek to reform the schools and send women back to the home. Married women were no longer allowed to work in the public sector. French Catholic cardinals and archbishops rejoiced as if Pétain had been sent by God to restore the rightful order. They saw the defeat of France in terms of divine punishment and would proclaim veneration of Pétain as a “man of providence” throughout the years of occupation.¹⁵ The Vatican recognized the Vichy state almost immediately

Pétain and Laval’s “National Revolution” had little to do with the Germans and was a uniquely French creation. Pétain was an authoritarian who ironically had thought Dreyfus was innocent. He called for an exclusive nation that brought France back to its roots, traditional hierarchy, and soil.¹⁶ Purges to purify the nation immediately took place as Jews, masons, communists, and foreigners were targeted. This was a continuation of the shift in policy in 1938, when Daladier had gone

¹² Drake. *Paris at War*, 75.

¹³ *Ibid*, 75.

¹⁴ Christofferson, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ This was an antisemitic code word. Traditional Catholic anti-Judaism had contemporary antisemitism had preached that Jews did not really belong to the nation as they did not work the land. Of course, this with a myth emanating out of the medieval practice of excluding Jews from owning or working the land and had nothing to do with reality.

after communists and had created internment camps for refugees (Jews, but mostly Spanish Civil War) in November 1938. This was a reaction of nativists appalled by the Third Republic's acceptance of refugees.

Reestablishing "family values" and "proper" gender roles were high on the agenda. Rather than facing their own incompetence, Vichy leaders assigned blame for France's defeat squarely on women. The nation, they asserted, had lost its male vigor and believed the declining birthrate (a result of the massive battlefield casualties of the First World War) were due to women entering the workforce. Laws against abortion and contraception were passed quickly. This was also seen in terms of negative "Jewish influence" over the "traditional" culture of France. Again, this was an absurdity as communists, Jews, and other targeted groups had served France faithfully and bravely in the war.



A Frenchman weeps as German soldiers march into Paris, on June 14, 1940. Note how the humiliation of the male reinforced France's sense of disgrace.



Illustrating the piety of Alsace by Jean-Jacques Waltz

In France women were generally seen as vulnerable – to be protected by men. Women were viewed as minors under protection of father or husband. The ideal woman was "pure" and a supportive helpmate to her husband. Therefore, independent women or women who had children out of wedlock, were perceived as "impure" and immoral. To "protect" women from the decadence of the Enlightenment, Vichy revived a 1907 law that had given women control over the money they had earned, restricted the right to divorce, criminalized adultery, punished abortion (with penalties including the death penalty), and imposed prison terms on those who abandoned their children. The number of women sent to prison for abortion quadrupled from 1938-1941.¹⁷

Vichy also attempted to replace aspired ideals of individual suffrage (women did not have the right to vote until after the war) with a single-family vote conducted by the male of the household. This was Vichy's attempt to restore their version of the traditional family. Of course, like everything Vichy attempted, ideology conflicted with reality. With so many prisoners of war (POW), women continued to make their own decisions and work in order to provide for the family. 80% of POW wives would join the workforce during World War II. Many, out of desperation due to lack of food and supplies looted by the Germans, were forced into prostitution.¹⁸

German Military Governance

Hitler gave the Army control of Occupied France including the power to arrest and to confiscate property. The Army immediately expelled enemy citizens and 'racial enemies' from nine French departments along the Atlantic coast. While Berlin planned the invasion of Britain, the Army concentrated on military security in France. General Otto von Stülpnagel (right) became the German military commander of France (MBF). He focused the Army on exploiting the French economy and utilizing its industry for the German war effort. Stülpnagel saw racial policies as beneath the Army's dignity and counterproductive given the experience in Poland. This misunderstanding of the importance Hitler placed on "racial security" was a miscalculation that would prove costly. Nazis such as Himmler, Göring, Ribbentrop, and Rosenberg would maneuver to get control.



Paris, the German Army, and Public Relations

The German military was eager to embrace Vichy given the Army's lack of manpower and resources – especially given the pending invasion of Britain and the shockingly swift collapse of France. The French police were given the authority to patrol Paris. Paris was cleaned up. Theatres, cafés, and cabarets reopened and sandbags were removed. This was a gesture to the shocked French public to bring Paris back to a semblance of "normalcy" and engage in a propaganda war to show the world that the Nazis were civilized. As the Nazis promoted the idea that they were protecting the cultural gem of Paris (Hitler held the city in awe and wished to freeze its monuments and architecture in time), but simultaneously despised the French. He cared little about the people and believed that restoring some of the "decadent" life of the city would

¹⁷ Christofferson, 43.

¹⁸ Ibid. 44.

continue to corrupt the French: "Let's let them degenerate. All the better for us."¹⁹ German soldiers were ordered to treat French women with relative dignity and respect and the Army helped refugees (eight million or one sixth of the population) to return to the cities. As German military vehicles aided the refugees in an effort to win the hearts and minds of the French, Vichy had to pay the costs, resettle them, and take the blame for any failures. Many Parisians marveled at the German effort, reflecting on the incompetence of their own leaders. Class resentments began to build within Paris as the poor had to stay behind while the well-off had fled. As the wealthier Parisians came back, aided by the Germans, they were seen as cowards and opportunists. In reverse, those that remained were seen as collaborators.

Meanwhile, German propaganda focused on the German soldier as the "trusted friend" while villainizing the leaders of the Third Republic and their British allies. Only July 3, 1940, when the Germans were poised to seize the French fleet (the 4th largest in the world), Churchill ordered an attack on its port of Mers-el-Kébir in French Algeria. 1,300 French sailors died in what the French still remember as 'our Pearl Harbor.' The German army stepped up its propaganda that the Third Republic and the British had betrayed France and continued to be its enemy.

"The Nightmare Becomes Completely Normal"²⁰

In the aftermath of the shock and trauma of defeat, resignation and mutual accommodation marked the early months of the German occupation. There were those who saw the disciplined and organized Germans as a stark reminder of the cowardice and incompetence of their leaders of the Third Republic. The French leaders had clearly not been telling the truth when they talked of the French army's invincibility and the Germans as on the brink of starvation and rebellion. The Germans were well fed and well-armed and seemed to quickly take over the city with an almost intimate knowledge. The apparent seamless nature of the transfer of control (of course, behind the scenes were internecine rivalries and conflict) left Parisians despondent and confused. Humiliation and shame fostered anger in some that channeled itself into a "wait and see" attitude. Some even accepted, initially, that at least the Germans stopped the Communists from seizing the city. The initial lack of fighting (the city was deserted and there was no defense of the city) strangely fed the confusion as the German Army did not seem to be the ruthless "Huns" the French were expecting. It was the early days...

While the German army worked to win the hearts and minds of the French, or at least make them apathetic, the SS was anxious to find a way into France. SS Chief Himmler, against Hitler's orders, snuck twenty SS members (in military police uniforms) into Paris under SS major Helmut Knochen who became the senior SS commander in Paris. SS captain Theodor Dannecker, in charge of the Gestapo's Department for Jewish Affairs, was Adolf Eichmann's man in Paris. The SS and police became part of the apparatus on von Stülpnagel's staff. Dannecker pushed for the immediate deportation of all Jews from France.

Himmler needed a justification for the SS to stay in France. Art theft rivalries opened the door. A multitude of German agencies and individuals participated in the looting of cultural objects throughout Europe. Amongst the most active participants were the men of Himmler's Security Police, the *Wehrmacht*, and Göring's Office of the Four-Year Plan, sometimes acting in direct competition or uneasy cooperation with each other.

Otto Abetz, a Francophile and ambitious foreign service officer, was working to build a power base in France at the expense of the Army. Interested in plundering art he was thrilled when assigned to the project of "safeguarding" all objects of art, public, private, and especially Jewish-owned by Foreign Minister Ribbentrop. Abetz announced to the Army that the embassy in Paris had been charged with seizing art works and ignored their ban on removing any art from the Louvre.

The Army was appalled that such theft violated their jurisdiction over confiscated property and would undermine their attempts to develop good relations with Vichy. The Army, meanwhile, also had their own "Art Treasures Protection Unit" and had been selectively blowing up patriotic French statues and monuments around Paris. Looting of French art became a turf war. The Army refused to let Abetz use their trains to transport the stolen goods. Abetz gave the SS the opening they were looking for by enlisting SS commander Knochen's help in transporting the plundered art. Abetz sent stolen

¹⁹ Drake. *Paris at War*, 77.

²⁰ Drake, 81.



Göring gives Hitler a looted painting, Hans Makart's "lady with a falcon."

carpets to Hitler who put them down in the Eagles' Nest. Hitler, pleased with Abetz' work, intervened and gave the SS power to confiscate Jewish property. By early July 1940, General Keitel, Chief of the Armed Forces High Command, informed his commanders that the Führer had determined that the Gestapo would search libraries, archives and Masonic lodges for "enemy materials" in order to confiscate them. It was the first blow to the *Wehrmacht's* power in France. The Pétain government protested Abetz's work in late October, but Hitler ignored the protest and instead rewarded Abetz by confirming him as the German ambassador to Paris (Vichy) in charge of all political affairs in November 1940.

Alfred Rosenberg, the Party's ideologue and art overseer, wanted in on the game as well. On July 17, 1940, the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (ERR) was formed as a special unit of his own Foreign Political Office. It operated in close cooperation with the *Wehrmacht* and Security Police in the occupied territories and by September had pushed Abetz aside. The ERR would plunder art from French Jewish and a number of Belgian Jewish collections from 1940 to 1944 and brought them to the *Jeu de Paume* building in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris for processing.

Hitler ruled that the ERR would transport goods to Germany "for safe keeping." Baron Kurt von Behr, head of the German Red Cross and working for Rosenberg's ERR (and rival of Abetz) ordered French removal firms to ship the goods. Hitler was motivated by ideology and greed. Seizing Jewish assets was, to Hitler, of prime importance for the war effort of fighting the "international Jewish conspiracy." Hitler ignored army and French protests.

Collaboration Elevated as Political Principle

On October 22-24, 1940, French leaders met with Hitler at Montoire to finalize the terms of the armistice. Laval, then Pétain, met with Hitler hoping to secure a place for France after Britain was invaded. It was, of course, an illusion of partnership that Hitler "agreed" to. Montoire shocked the French and provoked an upsurge in support for the British and anti-German feeling which culminating in the commemoration of the Armistice of World War I on November 11, 1940. Massive demonstrations by students and school children singing the Marseilles and displaying the Cross of Lorraine (a symbol of resistance) took place at the Arc de Triomphe. It was the responsibility of the Paris police to put down the demonstration. The police, despite German orders to ban all demonstrations that day, hesitated. The German Army now faced a dilemma. What to do if the police would not act? If the Army intervened, it could create a backlash that would undermine the *Wehrmacht's* policy of collaboration. In the end, there was no choice. The Germans charged the crowd with fixed bayonets. Some French police secretly released some of the students who were arrested. The Germans closed all Paris universities and demanded that all students register with police.



These events produced France's first "resistance" martyr, Jacques Bonsergeant. The young Bonsergeant and his friends got into some kind of tussle with German soldiers on the night of November 10. On December 24, 1940, the German military announced his execution. In this case, Bonsergeant was killed as a reprisal for the student demonstration on November 11 and an embarrassing December farce when Hitler tried to win over Parisians by transplanting Napoleon II's remains to Paris. The *Wehrmacht's* policy of collaboration would have its limits. In May 1940, the Nazis expelled tens of thousands of French speakers from Lorraine. These refugees illustrated what collaboration meant. French anger and frustration were channeled at Laval, who was despised, while Pétain (who was directing Vichy) became the Teflon leader who remained revered as the "hero of Verdun."

The National Revolution was a sham and was always reliant on its German overlords. This was difficult for Vichy leaders to comprehend. France was to be exploited by its collaboration. 700 million kgs of cereals were sent to Germany annually. This despite a 13% decline in workers which led to production dropping to 80% of its pre-war yield.²¹ France quickly suffered from a lack of food and rationing and hunger became an issue by the winter of 1940. Pressure fell upon women to feed their families while living up to the Vichy ideal for women. Vichy focused on Mother's Day as a way to reground

²¹ Christofferson, 53.

France. Pétain wrote that “Mothers of France, our native land, yours is the most difficult task, but also the most gratifying. You are...the true educators. You alone know how to inspire in all that inclination for work, that sense of discipline, that modesty, that respect, that give men character and make nations strong.”²²

Vichy Initiates Anti-Jewish Policy and the *Wehrmacht* Begins to Respond

There is a strong tradition of antisemitism in France – especially among the leaders of the Catholic Church and the French military. Both groups were influential in Vichy. As late as 1946, 40% of the French thought Jewish citizens were not truly French.²³ Many French distinguished between *Israélites* (assimilated) and *Juif* (“foreign” with a particular stigma of being seen as criminals. In September 1939, 300,000 Jews lived in France.²⁴ Two-thirds of these lived in Paris. Half of these were foreign, Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe who had been welcomed in France after World War I and were living in the poorer arrondissements of northern and eastern Paris. A quarter of the Parisian Jews were French-born Sephardi. In July 1940, without any orders or directions from Berlin, Vichy began its assault on Jews. On July 12, 1940, all people without a French father were banned from employment. On July 18, any citizens who had left the country between May and June 30 would be stripped of citizenship. On July 28 all foreigners over fifteen years old, living in the Seine district (Paris), had to register with the police. In July, the Germans forbade all written communication between Zones and crossing without permission was forbidden. As Vichy ratcheted up its antisemitic policies (for its own objectives as well as to impress the Germans) there were mixed responses. In Paris, French police stepped in (along with some German soldiers) to arrest antisemitic thugs and helped, even fraternized, with Jews. Despite Vichy initiatives, the German Army was anxious to distance itself from its conduct of murderous rampage in Poland. Most Parisians seemed apathetic to the creepy antisemitism. Some Catholic shop owners even put up the distinguishing yellow signs as it seemed to attract more customers.²⁵

In August 1940, Abetz pressed the Army to ban Jews fleeing from Unoccupied Zone to the German Occupied Zone (that had yet to introduce antisemitic measures). Three days later, Abetz, anxious to loot, urged Berlin to identify Jewish shops and Jews. The Army, not wishing to lose control of policy, tried to find a way forward and tasked military lawyers to pour over international law to justify any antisemitic initiatives. Under Article 41 of the Hague Convention they discovered that they could label Jews as “security threats.” On September 27, 1940, the Army banned any Jews who had left Occupied Zone from returning and published a legal definition of “Jew.” Vichy published its own definition of “Jew” which was both race-based and broader than the German definition. For Vichy, a Jew was someone with three Jewish grandparents or two Jewish grandparents if married to a Jew.



Registration of Jews, August 1941

On October 3, 1940, Vichy (under its own initiative) introduced the *Statut des Juifs* that barred Jews from civil, commercial, or industrial functions and public positions including the army. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Jews were ordered to register at local police stations. On October 4, 1940, a law against “Jewish foreigners” authorized the immediate arrest of foreign Jews. On October 20, the German Army ordered that all Jewish shops that opened onto a street had to be sold by December 26. The red signs Jews currently displayed would be replaced with the yellow ones.

Why did the Jews register? The Third Republic, in welcoming refugees to supplement the work force (and reaffirm France’s image as haven), required all foreigners to register with the police in order to work. Many of the Parisian Jews were refugees and wanted to act in a law-abiding way as it was also difficult to pass as native. The idea of registering would have been a new concept for French nationals, not immigrants. The mixed messages in Paris convinced many Jews that registering with the French police was not too dangerous. After all, the government would protect its people – especially in France!

²² Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945*. (New York: J. Wiley, 1995), 46.

²³ Christofferson, 107.

²⁴ <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005468>.

²⁵ Rosbottom, 118.

Support for Vichy varied. Vichy failed at almost everything they attempted: writing a constitution, collaboration with the Germans, economic reform, and restricting women's rights. They also failed in trying to actualize their ideology of the mythical France. Although regions such as the Vendée, a department in the Pays-de-la-Loire region in west-central France, supported the Catholic revival, regions such as Brittany, a cultural region in the northwest of France with a strong sense of local identity, resented Vichy's confused attempts at glorifying and promoting regional cultures by controlling fêtes from Vichy.

Responses to Occupation

When does accommodation become collaboration? The French still struggled with the trauma, humiliation, and shame of its collapse. How to respond when your own government signed the armistice and the Germans seemed to be behaving themselves? There were a variety of responses to the occupation. There was resistance. When the Germans tried to hang a giant Nazi flag from the Eiffel Tower they were shocked to find the cables cut. Soldiers had to climb to the top to hoist the swastika. A few hours later a wind blew the flag away and soldiers had to climb again to put a smaller one on top. The lift was repaired only after the war, when missing parts were suddenly "discovered." There was also humor: Anticipating the invasion of England, Hitler asked the chief rabbi how did Moses part the Red Sea? Good news and bad news, the rabbi responded. He used his staff that he always carried with him. Where is the staff now, Hitler asked? England, the rabbi replied.²⁶

In July 1940, a journalist from Normandy created a flyer, "Tips to the Occupied." One of the recommendations was to "Show an elegant indifference, but don't let your anger diminish."²⁷ German soldiers stationed in Paris quickly learned they did not fit in and became suffocated with loneliness. It was unnerving that everyone seemed to be very polite, but ignored your very existence.

Under duress, facing food shortages, and with their men captured and their status unclear, some collaborated. Everyone had to collaborate (adjust?) on some level, but few did so out of sympathy for the Nazi or Vichy cause. "Collaboration" was often a byproduct of membership in an institution, not individual initiative. For many elites, including the business class and some heads of industry, collaboration was a golden age. (Renault was the only major business nationalized after the war due to its collaboration).

By 1941 a subtle shift had taken place. Passive resistance began to emerge. During German propaganda movies, many French had sudden fits of heavy coughing. In one theater, a pigeon was released with a tricolor flag attached to its leg. The Germans were forced to turn the lights up in theatres. At cafés, Parisians would try to get tables nearest the sidewalk so that they could stretch their legs and trip Germans who happened to be walking by. In March 1941, Calvinist Pastor Marc Boegner condemned Vichy's *statut des Juifs*. On May 11, 1941, Parisians responded to de Gaulle's call to stage a mass, silent rally at Place Joan d'Arc. French police channeled it away from Nazi-occupied buildings and into the Tuileries Gardens across the street. In December 1941, many followed de Gaulle's request to stay indoors from 3-4 pm. By the summer of 1942 the V (victory) campaign emblazoned "V" on Nazi propaganda posters and on notices of those executed by the occupiers.

The SS Steps Up Its Role

Abetz and Laval were working to undermine Pétain – who they saw as too conservative and traditional to truly collaborate. Both got involved in a December 1940 plan by Hitler to transfer the remains of Napoleon II to Paris as a goodwill gesture supported by the Catholic Church.²⁸ The Parisians acerbically preferred "coal over ashes" and Pétain refused to attend the ceremony and moved to arrest Laval, who was becoming a target of French hate. Pétain also moved against Marcel Déat, the antisemitic founder of the Vichy National Popular Rally (RNP), which advocated for greater collaboration with Nazi Germany. Pétain quickly realized his powerlessness as the Germans (Abetz) ordered Pétain to release Laval and Déat.

²⁶ Rosbottom, 125.

²⁷ Ibid, 197.

²⁸ See Rosbottom (pp. 113-116) for a comical account of the bizarre melodramatic episode.

In March 1941, Adolf Eichmann ordered Dannecker (Jewish Affairs) and Knochen (Secret Police) to pressure Vichy on Jewish affairs. Ambassador Abetz persuaded the new Vichy PM Jean Louis Xavier François Darlan to create the Commissariat-General for Jewish Affairs (CGQ) to coordinate French policies in both Zones. Darlan was a French admiral who had served as the Minister of Marine in the Pétain administration. He had originally rejected the armistice, but then accepted it if there were guarantees that the French fleet would remain autonomous. He believed the fleet was the last force that could protect France. He refused to sail the fleet to British ports, but had promised the British that the fleet would never fall into German hands. The CGQT worked with the German army on Jewish affairs. The head of the CGQ was Xavier Vallat, a militant Catholic, and French nationalist antisemite. Vallat saw the CGQ as a test of collaboration, but exempted many French Jews from his actions. Vichy made determined efforts to protect French Jews from deportation (fearing a backlash) while leaving the Nazis free to do as they liked with nationals of other countries and stateless refugees as long as Vichy could help in looting them.



First Roundups

In May 1941, the French police in Paris conducted the first roundup of Jewish men (mostly Poles). They were sent to Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande internment camps that had been established before the war. There was little reaction to the roundups. By the summer of 1941 a contemporary estimate of antisemitic actions (occupational purges, seizure of apartments, bank accounts rifled, etc.) revealed that almost 50% of Parisian Jews found themselves cut off from any means of making a living.²⁹

Operation Barbarossa (Invasion of the USSR) and French Resistance

On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union in a “War of Destruction.” To Hitler, this would secure *lebensraum* and destroy the center of the “Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy.” Suddenly, the status and perception of French communists shifted. The French Communist (PCF) Resistance called for the French to fight fascists. PCF units were made up of men and women, and members of the International Brigades from the Spanish Civil War.

In July 1941, Vichy ordered a census of all Jews in the Unoccupied Zone as the German military cracked-down on communist demonstrators in Paris. In August 1941, the PCF conducted its first assassination. The German army warned that all prisoners would henceforth be treated as hostages and executed in future as reprisal. On August 14, 1941, the German Army banned the PCF and threatened German intervention if Vichy did not act strongly. There was no need to threaten Vichy. Vichy redoubled its efforts to demonstrate its loyalty to Germany and perhaps protect French nationals by volunteering to choose the hostages through new tribunals.

On October 20-21, 1941, the PCF tried to relieve the pressure on Paris by shooting Colonel Hotz in Nantes and Dr. Reimers in Bordeaux. Hitler was infuriated and ordered Otto von Stülpnagel to execute 100-150 French hostages for each “terrorist” attack. The Army had no objection to shooting civilians, but still worried about public relations. Stülpnagel complained to Berlin, treated the attacks as a single incident and shot “only” 98 hostages.

The reprisals did not sit well with the French who blamed not only the German military authorities, but the PCF as well. De Gaulle (from London) and Pétain ordered the assassinations to stop. For his part, De Gaulle discounted guerilla warfare and believed that only regular soldiers led by him could/should liberate France. As a conservative Catholic, he also loathed the Communists. Pétain even offered his freedom up as a shield against hostage taking.³⁰

Hermann Göring gave the Army a way to move forward. He needed Vichy support to supply the Afrika Korps and had asked the military to delay its executions in an effort to placate Vichy. However, when one Luftwaffe officer was slightly wounded in a PCF attack, Göring demanded executions, a billion franc fine, and a new innovation... deportation!

²⁹ Rosbottom, 245.

³⁰ Thomas J. Laub. *After the Fall: German Policy in Occupied France, 1940-1944*, 49.

Deportation as a Solution Under Guise of “Anti-Partisan” Policy

As atrocities escalated in the East, the political generals in Berlin pressured its field commanders in France to step up its war on Germany’s “racial” enemies. The Army had by then radicalized itself and on June 6, 1941, had issued the “Commissar Order” that would facilitate genocide and mass atrocity on the eastern front. Hitler had proceeded to link anti-partisan policy with the “Final Solution” to the “Jewish question” believing that all partisans were linked to the “international Jewish conspiracy” centered in Moscow. Methods developed in the East would be a guideline to deal with all partisans. On July 16, 1941, Hitler argued that “This partisan war...enables us to exterminate everyone who opposes us...”³¹ On December 18, 1941, Hitler told Himmler that the partisan war in the East provided a useful framework for destroying the Jews. Himmler’s wrote in his appointment book: ‘Jewish Question / to be exterminated as partisans.’³²

As PCF assassinations increased, the *Wehrmacht* found itself in a wrestling match with the SS over control of racial policy. Stülpnagel recognized that executing French hostages only inflamed things and welcomed Göring’s “suggestion” to deport them instead. Based on his experience in France he believed that deporting Communists and foreign-born Jews would arouse less anger. On August 20-21, 1941, Otto von Stülpnagel ordered a massive roundup of “Judeo-Bolshevik criminals” (note how Nazi ideology had crept into the Army’s thinking) in Paris’ 11th arrondissement. The Army oversaw the operation and the French police carried it out.

The prisoners were sent to the Drancy Internment camp. It was run by the prefect of the Paris police, Admiral François Bard, and staffed by France’s national military force. By autumn 1942, 42,000 Jews had passed through Drancy. Nearly one third came from the Unoccupied Zone. Many were foreign or stateless Jews sacrificed by Vichy in a vain attempt to spare French Jews. By autumn 1941, conditions were so grim that the Germans ordered the French to release 900 ill prisoners.³³



View of Drancy with French gendarme on guard.

Refugees Fleeing Vichy

Vichy required potential emigrants to have a valid entry visa for their destination country. To get a transit visa to a country such as Spain, passage on a ship had to be secured in advance. In that reservations were only good for about three weeks, there was little time to collect all the documentation needed to escape. Vichy bureaucracy was insensitive and transit visas had to often be obtained from more than one consular office. Keeping all the paperwork up to date was incredibly difficult as each had its own short-term expiration date. Under the Armistice agreement Vichy officials shared applications for exit visas with the Gestapo as the Nazis were seeking to arrest refugees for political or racial reasons. For refugees imprisoned in French internment camps it was nearly impossible to obtain all the proper permissions. By the end of 1941, most legal avenues of escape were closed.³⁴

French Military Collaboration

On August 27, 1941, Laval and Déat were in Versailles at a send-off of the *Legion des Volontaires Français contre le Bolshevism* (The French Volunteer Legion Against Bolshevism or L.V.F. for short). A PCF attack wounded Laval and Déat. On August 28 *Le Petit Parisien* reported that “The attack had been the hallmark of an Anglo-Judeo-Soviet crime” and described the Free French as “the valets of Judeo-British capitalism.”³⁵ Not long afterward, on September 11, 1941, Charles Lindbergh speaking to the America First movement stated: “The three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish and the Roosevelt administration...I am not attacking either the Jewish or the British people. Both races, I admire. But I am saying that the leaders of both the British and the Jewish races...for reasons which are not American, wish to involve us in the war.”³⁶ The SS also reacting to the assassination attempt on Laval.



French soldiers in Russia, November 1941

³¹ Ibid. 125.

³² Ibid.

³³ Richard Vinen. *The Unfree French; Life Under the Occupation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 143.

³⁴ <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005468>.

³⁵ Laub. *After the Fall*, 125.

³⁶ Charles Lindbergh’s September 11, 1941 Des Moines Speech, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_F48oaOskl.

Escalations Towards the “Final Solution”

In September 1941, Hitler ordered (via Keitel, Military chief) the execution of 50-100 French for every German killed. On October 2/3, 1941, the SS (Knochen involved) snuck explosives into Paris, bombed seven synagogues, and wounded two German soldiers. Learning later of SS involvement, an angry Stülpnagel, determined to preserve French cooperation and refused to carry out large-scale executions. With this SS provocation, he complained to his superiors in Berlin that he would not carry out Hitler’s September order because it was the SS and not the PCF who had wounded the German soldiers.

Hitler weighed in on December 7, 1941. Hitler drew on the Army’s institutional fear of partisans and permitted the Army to avoid negative consequences of mass shootings by issuing his “Night and Fog” deportation decree. The Army knew what deportation east meant. After another assassination by the French Resistance in Paris, Stülpnagel, also anxious to make Paris secure for German troops recovering from combat in the East, now used military police, secret police, and the Paris police to arrest more wealthy Jews. They were sent to the German-run Royallieu-Compiègne internment camp for deportation east. The deportations were delayed due to shortage of trains. 95 hostages were executed.

On January 20, 1942, SS leaders Heydrich and Eichmann finalize cooperation of remaining bureaucrats in the “final solution” of the Jewish Question at the Wannsee Conference. The Wannsee Protocols outline target quotas for deportation and mass murder. France is on list A with target quotas of 165,000 Jews from the occupied zone and 700,000 Jews from the unoccupied zone (Vichy).

On February 2, 1942, Field Marshal Keitel orders Stülpnagel to execute large numbers of imprisoned Communists, Jews, and others and to arrest at least 1,000 Jews or Communists for later “evacuation”. Stülpnagel, facing a clash with his military conscience, refuses and submits a bitter letter of resignation through the chain of command and perhaps even has a breakdown. He is replaced by his cousin, Karl von Stülpnagel (implicated for war crimes working with the *Einstzagruppen* (mobile killing units) on the eastern front). Unable to reconcile his conscience, he has joined the German resistance. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel of the German High Command demands that the MBF respond more forcefully to attacks. In February 1942, Himmler, learning of Stülpnagel’s resignation, met with Hitler and persuaded him to give the SS the power of security and “racial preservation” in France.

SS Seize Control From the Wehrmacht and Accelerate the “Final Solution”

Karl von Stülpnagel, the new Military Governor for Occupied France, was no Nazi, but he was an obedient soldier. When Field Marshal Keitel demanded that he respond more forcefully to attacks he participated in deportations of Jews and Communists (so long as the SS did it), but also plotted to overthrow the Nazis while doing what he could to reduce the number of hostage killings.

In March 1942 the newly appointed SS police Chief Carl Oberg and his aide Karl Knochen began to dismantle Army offices



Two Jewish women in Paris.

dealing with security. On March 27, 1942, the SS requisitioned buses from the French police and transported male Jews from Drancy to Auschwitz in the first reprisal deportation. In April 1942, Hitler ordered the roundups and deportation of Jews in Paris. In May 1942 Reinhard Heydrich (just before his assassination) visited his newly appointed and brutal SS police chief Oberg at the Ritz in Paris. Heydrich needed to inform him of the Wannsee Protocols (January 1942) and the annihilation target numbers for French Jews. In June 1942 Hitler officially installed SS police Chief Carl Oberg to take over German and French forces in Occupied Zone and the SS began its campaign of marginalization and targeting of Jews began in earnest. On

May 29, 1942, orders were issued through the Army (something the SS had learned to do after the turf war battles during the Polish invasion of 1939) for Jews to wear the yellow star beginning on June 7. 400,000 stars (needing five thousand meters of cloth) had to be produced almost overnight.³⁷ They were to be picked up at local police stations – and paid for by the French. René Bousquet (General Secretary of the Vichy Police) volunteered to help hunt down Vichy’s enemies

³⁷ Rosbottom, 261.

naively believing that the SS would allow him some autonomy over his police if he demonstrated his initiative. Vichy had created a centralized police force, but the Parisian force was autonomous and worked with the Germans.

Vichy, however, refused to issue the star fearing a public backlash. Public responses had been mixed. Some Jews were shunned, some embraced, while many Jews wore them with pride. Seeing children wearing the large star (all sizes were uniform due to the herculean effort to produce them) upset Parisians. SS actions were backfiring. This time, the French displayed compassion. Stars appeared with "Buddhist," "Goy," "Swing." One priest even put a star on the baby Jesus in a Christmas manger.³⁸

In July 1942, a meeting took place at Gestapo HQ in Paris in response to Hitler's April order to round up Parisian Jews. Vichy leaders, CGQJ, French police, and the railway service met with the SS. Vichy offered to deport foreign Jews, but Dannecker insisted that 40% of the 22,000-target number be French Jews and that Vichy did the arresting (due to the lack of SS manpower). CGQJ ordered the round-ups to demonstrate France's commitment to Germany and the French railway officials planned the deportation trains and schedules. Vichy's police Chief René Bousquet offered total cooperation if he could retain control over the police. He pragmatically refused to round up French Jews and was supported by Laval. It was agreed that the French police, on its own, would round up foreign Jews only. Jean Leguay, Bousquet's second-in-command and his representative in the occupied zone (agreement between Oberg and Bousquet), was tasked with the roundups. At this stage, Vichy leaders accepted that deportations were for work camps in the East.

Vélodrome d'Hiver ("Vél d'Hiv") Roundup

On July 16-17 1942, "Operation Spring Wind" to deport the Jews in Paris went into action. The French Resistance learned of it in advance (perhaps from some police and government officials or resistance spies within) and warned some male Jews expecting that only men



Buses outside the Vélodrome

would be targeted. Oberg and the 4200 French police ruthlessly rounded up 13,000 men, women, and children (4,000) and brought them to the "Vél d'Hiv" racetrack in the 15th arrondissement in public buses. Many babies and young children were abandoned or returned home to find their families gone. They wandered the streets and were



Still from 2010 French film, La Rafle.

rescued by teenagers from Jewish orphanages. Most of those taken were sent to five French-administered detention camps. These deportations (under Vichy's police Chief René Bousquet) stirred the first strong protest from the mainstay of Vichy, the Catholic Church. Why now? The toll had been horrific and the round up excruciatingly public. Of those rounded up 5,802 were women and 4051 children. Families were detained for a week without sanitation, food, water, or basic necessities in the middle of summer. This was a shock to Catholic sensibilities. (Between 1942 and 1944, 11,400 children were deported from France and only 200 came back.)³⁹ The Jews of the "Vél d'Hiv" roundup were sent mostly to Auschwitz, but also Sobibor. At first, Vichy refused to send the children east and only their parents (beaten by French police) were initially sent. Laval then insisted that children must go with their parents wrongly thinking that the French would accept the

roundups more if families were not separated and Eichmann later ordered the children to be deported to Auschwitz.⁴⁰

The French police were complicit. Throughout the occupation, 90% of the deportations were conducted by the police.⁴¹ 4500 French police organized and conducted the "Vél d'Hiv" roundup.⁴² French police had collected and maintained files on Parisian Jews. There were no Germans to be seen. In fact, they did not have the necessary manpower.

³⁸ Drake. *Paris at War*, 259.

³⁹ Christofferson, 124.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 111.

⁴¹ Rosbottom, 249.

⁴² Ibid, 276.

During 1942, officials sent 41,951 Jews to Germany, although the deportations came to a temporary halt when some religious leaders warned Vichy against possible public reaction. A handful of French Catholic leaders now spoke up. Archbishop Saliège of Toulouse was the first to condemn the roundups during mass on August 23, 1942. The appearance of legal process was very important to Vichy and the Nazis. Marie Reille was arrested by French police in Bordeaux in 1942. She had two Jewish grandparents, but was not married to a Jew. She was deported to Auschwitz. When the Germans discovered their “error” (she was not a Jew according to Vichy law) they sent her back to France directly from Auschwitz.



The trauma of families separated, of children abandoned, of the killing in the camps – all with the collusion of French authorities and police is still one of the most difficult and painful episodes for the French to face today. However, the pace of deportations slowed after French reactions in the summer and fall of 1942. Laval was wrong thinking that deporting whole families would temper French responses. In fact, these policies created a groundswell of sympathy for Jews. Only two of the thirty-one Vichy-appointed prefects in the Unoccupied Zone reported that public opinion in their departments supported Vichy’s policies on Jews.⁴³ Protestant leaders spoke out almost in unison (and had been supporting the Resistance) against Vichy policies. Although the Catholic Church leadership was not a major force in rescue, many individual Catholics risked their lives to hide and rescue Jews. Out of the approximately 330,000 Jews living in France in 1939, a little less the one quarter were eventually rounded up.⁴⁴

The Holocaust was a gendered experience. When asked about their memory of the camps, men remember hunger while women often remember the lack of hygiene. The Nazis would target males first. As the “Final Solution” grew into Nazi policy, women were targeted as mothers and caregivers and were often killed upon arrival.

Laval and Vichy were now cautious in collaborating with the Nazi agenda, not out of conviction, but out of pragmatism. Laval knew about the Extermination camps, but feared public opposition. In comparison to other Western European countries, France’s Jews fared relatively better. Had the pace of deportation continued in 1943 and 1944 that would not have been the case. The French were less successful in protected foreign-born Jews. Only 3% of foreign Jews returned alive.⁴⁵

French Prisoners of War | Crisis of Male Identity

Many POWs had surrendered in 1940 thinking that they were soon to be released. The Germans had never anticipated so many prisoners in such a short time and their status remained unclear. They were sent to work camps in Germany (many without barbed wire). There were penalties for escape attempts or fraternization, but many of the prisoners of war accommodated themselves. In 1941, some prisoners were released (WW I vets, fathers of four children) as a good will gesture to Vichy. Connections and class helped get your name on the list of those repatriated. As the occupation of France dragged on and difficulties mounted some at home began to question the masculinity of their soldiers who seemed apathetic.



Failing German War Effort | “Relève” 1942

The German military and economy had only succeeded by looting its way forward as it conquered. As the war dragged on Germany continued to exploit Europe. Still short of men and material, the Nazis attempted to utilize forced labor. In 1942, an idea was launched to utilize French prisoners to bolster the work force in Germany. By 1942, 45,000 French worked for the German army as domestic servants, cooks, mechanics, and office workers. 275,000 were building airfields and fortifications along the coast. 400,000 worked in armaments.⁴⁶ The Germans now directed Vichy to supply more skilled labor volunteers, but offered no rewards for cooperating. Laval, back in power, threatened to resign. The

⁴³ Christofferson, 114.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 112.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 124.

Germans, desperate for labor, agreed to furlough one French POW for every three volunteers. Laval created the “Relève” (“relief”) “volunteer” labor force program.

This was a bad idea from a desperate Germany. The French would resist (although having a crisis of conscience about their POWs) and the Germans would diminish the skilled labor force already working in France. In September 1942, Vichy passed three laws to meet German demands. Interestingly, men (aged 18-50) and *unmarried* women (aged 21-35) were ordered to work at least thirty hours per week in either France or Germany. Some did volunteer, but these were mostly poorer people desperate to find work or escape abusive situations. They, of course, were viewed with contempt. The Catholic Church sent brave priests to help those deported keep their discipline and morality. While many of the women who in their desperation “volunteered” were called collaborators, the priests who also went to Germany were not. It is also interesting to consider that in 1943, 197,000 French POWs accepted the offer to become voluntary workers for brief furloughs and higher pay.

STO: Forced Labor

In late 1942, Vichy admitted that the Relève was a failure and replaced it with the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO). Labor would no longer be a voluntary decision. Over 2½ million French (including POWs) were held in Germany. About 450,000 were farmers whose absence increased the chance of famine in France.⁴⁷ One in five French spend part of the war in Germany. As resentment built and Allied bombing increased over Germany, many saw the Resistance as preferable. The French were much quicker than any other Western Europeans (including the Dutch and the Danes) to perceive that collaboration would not work.

Operation Torch | 8 November 1942 | Tide Begins to Turn

On November 8, 1942, Allied forces invaded Vichy North Africa in Operation Torch. Transports from Drancy to Auschwitz were temporarily halted as the trains were used for the German Army to occupy southern France on November 10.

The Resistance

Robert Gildea wrote that it might be more accurate to “talk less about French Resistance than about resistance in France.”⁴⁸ The great majority of the French coped and remained unengaged. “Collaboration” not resistance, made sense before 1943. We need to ask what is considered resistance and by whom? Who or what was being resisted? When? What were the goals? At first, there was no single structure to the French Resistance. Different groups emerged to oppose Vichy or the Nazis or both. Economic immigrants from Eastern Europe, Jewish refugees, British operatives from SOE, squabbling groups of the ‘resisters of the interior’, Catholics, German Communists, and Spanish Republicans of International Brigades, competed often against each other. The earliest resisters, the communists, were looked upon with disdain. Often resisters were young, impetuous, and poorly organized. Many of the resisters in Paris were children of Spanish Civil War Republican refugees, Jewish emigrants, and communists.

The communist rank-and-file Resistance (FTP) rejected their leaders’ initial alliance with Germany after the 1939 nonaggression pact with the USSR. They began their armed resistance on August 21, 1941, after the German invasion of the USSR. They urged immediate action and did so at a high cost. They attacked Pétainists and collaborationists which actually made some Pétainists support de Gaulle. The FTP-MOI Resistance group was made up of immigrant Jews who, unlike other Communist groups, took heavy casualties. Years later, many of the survivors accused their leadership of giving them the most dangerous missions and then betraying them. The British were reluctant to arm them and de Gaulle rejected any British aid as meddling in French affairs. Eventually, British SOE divided into two sections: pro-Gaullist Resistance and anti-Gaullist Resistance. FDR, who personally loathed de Gaulle, had recognized Vichy as France’s government while the U.S. had been neutral. Seeing de Gaulle as illegitimate (indeed seen as a traitor by officers in Vichy) the U.S. backed anti-Gaullist units.

⁴⁷ Vinen, *The Unfree French*, 247.

⁴⁸ Nicholas Shakespeare. “The truth behind the French Resistance myth.” *The Telegraph*, September 4, 2015.

After 1943, armed resistance grew beyond the original communist groups due to: round-ups; supply shortages; Allied advances; German setbacks; forced labor; lack of German concessions; and escalating SS actions. All major resistance groups condemned antisemitism, but saving Jews was not a primary goal. The STO (forced labor) created the countryside resistance movement known as the *Maquis*. De Gaulle gradually assumed leadership of the Resistance. De Gaulle's Free French movement superimposed the Cross of Lorraine over the tricolor flag in the first symbolic appeal of Left and Right unity. On May 27, 1943, Jean Moulin worked with de Gaulle and united the scattered elements of spontaneous French partisan activity with a National Council of the Resistance. De Gaulle was recognized as the leader, but Moulin was betrayed and captured. Tortured by the Gestapo in Lyon and Paris, he died on July 8, 1943.



Jean Moulin

The Allies offered little if any military support to the Resistance before the Normandy landings in June 1944, but the British did increase supplying them in early 1944. Foreigners had a larger part in Resistance than is generally accepted. By June 1944, the Resistance had assassinated 2500.⁴⁹ There had been some pitched battles where the Resistance took heavy casualties before the invasion, but the Resistance remained undertrained, uncoordinated, and ill equipped. The Resistance only became a mass movement in 1944 and then only after the Allied landings in Normandy. Even so, it is accepted that the Resistance played a significant role in the liberation of France and shortened the war by at least two months.⁵⁰ The French Resistance Medal was granted to 65,295 people (including 25,468 posthumously). There is a higher level: the Medal of the Resistance with Rosette that was assigned to 4586 people.



Gloria Tillion

Women, who did not have the right to vote in France, were active in the Resistance as protestors, carriers, transporters of weapons and radios (often in baby carriages), distributors of newspapers, and fighters. About 10% of the Resistance were women and by all accounts were indispensable.⁵¹ When resistance fighter Gloria Tillion (arrested and survived Ravensbrück concentration camp) was asked why she had taken up arms she replied, "Quite simply, colonel, because the men dropped them."⁵² Despite this, de Gaulle removed them from the front line when he arrived in France and most were passed over for military honors. Only six received one of the 1038 Orders of the Liberation awarded while most were glorified as "good mothers" who conducted themselves only within traditional female roles.



Although de Gaulle had celebrated Joan d'Arc and called for rallies around her statue in Paris, his Catholic upbringing had taught him that women who stand out like this were exemplary, but not a model of womanhood. In light of this misogyny it is interesting to reflect upon one "hero" who was awarded the Rosette de la Resistance for his efforts. François Mitterrand who served two terms as President of France (1981-1995) was wounded in combat in 1940 and had escaped a German POW camp. When he arrived home, he volunteered to work for Vichy blacklisting Gaullists, Communists, freemasons and other opponents. In 1943 he enlisted in the French Resistance movement when it became clear that the Nazis would lose the war. He headed the National Movement of War Prisoners and Deportees and worked within the government to forge the necessary papers needed in the Resistance. Mitterrand claimed that his government job had been only a cover for his Resistance activities all along, although his work for war prisoners took place while he was in exile in London and Algeria.

In contrast, French Resistance fighter Simone Segouin, from Chartres France, was eighteen when she joined the FTP Resistance group (Communists and French nationalists). She helped to derail a train, blew up bridges, and helped capture 25 soldiers in her village. She was awarded the prestigious Croix de Guerre and had a city street named in her honor. And yet, in August 2015 she is remembered in the Scottish Mail as...? (see picture right).



Fighting the Resistance with Vichy Extremists

⁴⁹ Vinen, 339.

⁵⁰ Rosbottom, 202.

⁵¹ Anne Sebba. "The forgotten women of the French resistance." *The Telegraph*, July 11, 2016.

⁵² Shakespeare. "The truth behind the French Resistance myth."



Joseph Darnand,
leader of the Milice.

Regardless of judging its effectiveness, the Resistance did occupy German and Vichy leaders with a growing unease and forced them to focus resources to combat it. With growing failures caused by its refusal to negotiate with Vichy and a growing lack of enthusiasm from the police, the Nazis were forced to work with more extreme Vichy officials whose fascist leanings made them more natural allies. SS Klaus Barbie headed the feared Gestapo in Lyons. The Nazis relied upon different French groups to help combat the Resistance. *Les Brigades Spéciales* (BS) was a unit within the French Police recruited to fight the FTP-MOI. With about 200 zealous volunteers they were especially effective capturing more than 1500 young fighters.⁵³ The

Milice Française (French Militia) was created by Laval on January 3, 1943, on Hitler's orders. Their mission was to "take an active role in the political, social, economic, intellectual, and moral rejuvenation of France."⁵⁴ 15,000 strong they created a police state, sat as judges, and expedited death sentences. They were grounded in antisemitism and fear of communists. They proved to be very effective against the inexperienced early resisters. They were led by the vicious Joseph Darnand. In many ways, this was a continuation of the ongoing political civil war within French society between Left and Right.

The "French Gestapo" was recruited by the Gestapo and led by the French gangster Henri Lafont. Lafont became a key player in French social life and dominant in the world of entertainment as well.

In July 1943, Laval signed a decree for the French to join the Waffen SS. Ironically, many joined to get rid of a "weak" Pétain. 800 joined by September 1943 including *Milice* leader Darnand who became an SS officer. This allowed the Germans to begin arming the Milice (had been reluctant to do so) with mostly captured British guns from Dunkirk. After liberation in 1944, an estimated 25-35,000 miliciens were executed by the Resistance. Others fled to Germany and joined the Charlemagne Division of the Waffen SS. Laval – to continue the fight against communists – began to try to reposition himself as a friend of the U.S. and Britain.

The French Catholic leadership refused to allow priests to say mass for members of the Resistance. They paid heed to Pope Pius XI's 1937 encyclical on the threat of communism. They ignored the Vatican's statements against Vichy and only stopped excommunicating priests performing sacraments or services to the Resistance one week after the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944.

1943 – 1944

French collaborationists, on the other hand, sought to ally themselves closer to Nazi Germany as Pétain and Vichy were "not fascist enough" for their liking. Vichy gave way to the Paris Catholic thugs. Doriot and Déat schemed to remove Laval to create a fascist France that would be a stronger ally to Hitler. Hitler, of course, had no interest in supporting a rival fascist state. As the tide of the war shifted, Pétain removed Laval and outlined a new Republic in an attempt to gain President Roosevelt's approval. Hitler backed Laval and replaced Laval's head of police, René Bousquet with Joseph Darnand, head of the *Milice*.

Le Chambon-sur-Lignon | "Toujours prêt à servir."

(From USHMM)

Despite grassroots antisemitism in France, the French population generally did not accept extreme measures against Jews. From December 1940 – September 1944 a remarkable non-violent resistance movement took place. Led by Pastor André Trocmé, his wife Magda, and his assistant, Pastor Edouard Theis, this Protestant village (population 5,000) and the villages on the surrounding plateau (population 24,000) forged identification and ration cards for refugees and saved more than 3,500 Jews, many of whom were smuggled to the Swiss border. The OSE (*Oeuvre de Secours Aux Enfants*, Children's Aid Society), a French-Jewish childcare agency, played an important role in escorting children to Le Chambon. The Quaker organization,



⁵³ Rosbottom, 227.

⁵⁴ Christofferson, 66.

American Congregationalists, the Swiss Red Cross, and even national governments like Sweden contributed funding to maintain the houses harboring Jews in Le Chambon.

The unity and solidarity of the local population compelled the Vichy authorities to proceed with caution in the region. Sometimes Vichy police officials gave the villages informal warnings before conducting their searches. This pattern changed, however, after the Germans occupied southern France in November 1942.

On February 13, 1943, French police arrest Pastors Trocmé and Theis, as well as the headmaster of the local primary school, Roger Darcissac. The French authorities released them after 28 days, but they continued to operate rescue activities until late 1943, when rumors of re-arrest sent them into hiding. Magda Trocmé took over the leadership of the rescue enterprise.

On June 29, 1943, German police raided a local secondary school and arrested eighteen students. The Germans identified five of them as Jews and sent them to Auschwitz, where they died. The German police arrested their teacher, Daniel Trocmé (Pastor Trocmé's cousin) and deported him to the Lublin/Majdanek concentration camp, where the SS killed him. Roger Le Forestier, Le Chambon's physician who was especially active in helping Jews obtain false documents, was arrested and subsequently shot on August 20, 1944, in Montluc prison on orders of the Gestapo in Lyon. Throughout the war, Le Chambon refused the assistance of the French underground fearing that militant resistance would threaten both the rescue operation and their values as Christians.

The French were most successful in saving Jewish children. Less than 13% were deported from France.⁵⁵

France Liberated | 1944

Battles between the *Milice* and the Resistance (*Maquis*) increased into the spring 1944. The *Milice* responded by going after former Third Republic leaders. On June 6, 1944, Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy in northwestern France and began the liberation of France. 177 Free French landed at Normandy as the Allies did not trust de Gaulle whom they did not consult in planning the invasion. De Gaulle later rejected suggestions that they be awarded the Order of Liberation arguing that they were part of a 'British unit!' Churchill called him: "Joan of Arc in trousers."⁵⁶

The SS, in response to the invasion, went after Jewish children in Paris (hostels, orphanages...). In July, German generals attempted to kill Hitler. The plot included Karl von Stülpnagel. 15,000 were arrested including SS General Oberg. On August 5, Hitler appointed General Dietrich von Choltitz to take over the defense of France. As the Allies approached Paris, Laval and Abetz schemed to declare it an open city and welcome the Allies. Laval proposed to reconvene the National Assembly (which had not met since 1940), welcome the Allies in Paris, and collaborate with them by setting up postwar Vichy rule in France. The plot evaporated with no support from French notables.

On August 10, French workers went on a general strike that paralyzed the city. French police and the postal service joined them in the coming days. The Germans arrested the workers (held them as hostages) while Jewish deportation continued. Laval, anxious to continue the fight against communists, began to try to reposition himself as a friend of the U.S. and Britain. He and his wife were "invited" to leave Paris with German troops. On August 18, the Germans left Paris. General Choltitz had no intention of following Hitler's hysterical and insane orders to hold and then destroy Paris.⁵⁷

As the Germans withdrew, communists urged a mass uprising while Gaullists favor a short, 48-hour uprising. De Gaulle was concerned about the Resistance and especially the communists. On August 22, Parisians were called to the barricades and shut the Germans out of the center of the city. On August 24, although the Allies had planned to avoid Paris (no military objective and too many starving people), the Free French General Leclerc ordered a small detachment of tanks to Paris. Many of these were Spanish Civil War veterans. General Eisenhower changed his mind and decided to support the liberation of Paris. Information was difficult to get and the liberation of was marked by running battles and not a mass

⁵⁵ Chritofferson, 124.

⁵⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/fighters-in-the-shadows-french-resistance-robert-gildea/>

⁵⁷ Vinen, 325.

uprising. 150 Paris police died fighting to free the city.⁵⁸ On August 26, 1944, General Leclerc's 2nd Armored Division in de Gaulle's victory parade in Paris bore Spanish names and much of the division were African troops (4,000). De Gaulle was magnificent. He spoke powerfully at the Hôtel de Ville (city hall), lit the flame at the Arc de Triomphe, and paraded to a mass at Notre Dame. Navigating the complicated liberation landscape, de Gaulle forbade Vichy hardliner Cardinal-archbishop of Paris Monsignor Suhard from saying the mass and replaced him with the next senior prelate, Monsignor Paul Brut. De Gaulle had bridged the historic divide in a moment of national reconciliation.

Was General Eisenhower correct in trying to bypass Paris for fear of using precious supplies and potentially bogging down the advance east. From a military perspective, yes. The Germans were able to rally their positions along the Siegfried Line, something that may not have happened if the Allies had continued their slugging offensive north of Paris. On the other hand, there was something symbolically important in liberating Paris, the symbol of a freethinking Europe and the home of the Rights of Man. Did Parisians have to fight to liberate their city? General Choltitz had announced a truce (knowing his weak position due to the garrison's lack of young, trained, and disciplined soldiers) and was evacuating the city without shooting at the scattered, undisciplined, and growing Resistance.

Operation Dragoon | Allied invasion of Southern France



On August 15, 1944, the Allies landed in southern France. Initially planned to coincide with the invasion of Normandy this attack had to be delayed. A much larger French contingent was present here. Of the 575,000 who served in the liberating French army only half came from France. The rest came from the former French empire.⁵⁹ 50-60% of French units armed by the U.S. came from the French colonies of Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, including the decorated 3rd Algerian Infantry Division. The statue at left in Frejus en Provence recognizes the landings of Free French forces in 1944. This is still an inconvenient truth exposing the de Gaulle

myth that "white French males" liberated the country. German resistance was minimal, but significant. Retreating German troops posed a sudden and new threat to civilian populations that had been relatively safer in the countryside during the occupation. Massacres and brutalities followed in the wake of retreating German forces in places like Oradour-sur-Glane.

Liberation Could Be Painful | Photography as Historical Tool

The first images of the liberation of France that I can remember are of the *Tondue*, the ubiquitous images of women punished by the liberated French for their "collaboration" with the Nazi occupier. There was always something disturbing in witnessing the retribution and unforgiving violence enacted upon these women. Was this justifiable vengeance or something else?

Women were not encouraged to share their stories, let alone their traumas. Their actions, struggles, and choices (abortion, "collaboration") were and continue to be judged publicly and through a moral microscope. This is why sexual assault is perhaps the most underreported crime. This, of course, conveniently ignores the hypocrisy and double standard of the supposed virility and sexual prowess of the French male who is encouraged to share his exploits, but not his private struggles. Additionally, women, unlike men, were categorized as either collaborator or resister by French society. There was no grey area. A young woman, for instance, who dutifully followed the dictates of her father (an admirable quality in French society) was in trouble if her father had worked for Vichy. Women in the Resistance were often praised because their achievements were done within the context of proscribed feminine roles. Women also downplayed their Resistance roles in the postwar years.

Men, on the other hand, were discouraged from sharing their feelings or choices of survival and are allowed to keep them private. Institutions such as the police and the military discourage feelings and emotions and males who do share their inner struggles risk being seen as weak or effeminate. Men were/are seen as extraordinary if they perform any task assigned to women while women were/are seen as extraordinary if they are leaders or active resisters.

⁵⁸ Christofferson, 188.

⁵⁹ Christofferson, 168.

We must avoid simple answers or dismissive moral conclusions to complex history. It is more important to see complexity and the multiple forces and perspectives that act upon us in order to allow ourselves to make better decisions in the future. Something vicious and dark was unleashed in the few weeks after liberation. A public seeking to purge their experiences and remove frustrations, powerlessness, guilt, and anger needed scapegoats. Women were the targets in public acts of communal venting.

How can photographs help us to see complexity and go beyond interpreting photos as simple illustrations of “historical fact”? Photos do not merely capture the historical past, but interpret it.

The series of photos taken by Robert Capa in Chartres, France after liberation in August 1944 can be used as “documentation” of the righteous indignation of post-occupation France. Although uncomfortable, these scenes of public brutality can be seen as a morality play of those in the right against those who decided to collaborate. In Richard Vinen’s *The Unfree French* the author asks us to go beyond this. Chartres provides a context that will help to illustrate the complexities – especially in post war memory – of the German occupation. Chartres was big enough to attract countryside girls to a place occupied by the Germans. Surrounded by farmland, Chartres’ experience during the war was less harsh. It was easy for young men to avoid working in Germany by either avoiding the city or by working in the countryside. The landscape, bereft of woods or hills, made it difficult for the Resistance to operate. Chartres was filled with men who had fled their homes during the occupation, but who had not taken up arms against the Germans.



Postwar condemnation of female collaborators merged with more general condemnations of specific “immoral” behavior. Many French women had daily contact with the Germans in jobs then reserved for less “respectable” women such as waitress, shop assistant, and chambermaid. These women often came from the most underprivileged part of society. Often young and poorly educated some had fled from abusive families. French authorities, concerned with protecting bourgeois girls from being sent to Germany as forced laborers, had no such reservations about ‘non-respectable’ women. Association with Germans in these settings reinforced that these women had made the ‘choice’ to collaborate. In many cases association with the enemy offered a kind of revenge for these women against the families and society that had marginalized them. Targeting these women after liberation was an expression of a variety of motives. They were seen to have escaped (been liberated from?) their natural place in society both in terms of being elevated during the occupation, but also in having escaped their outcast status as undesirable, non-respectable, and immoral. Interestingly, prostitutes were not necessarily targeted, as they were already perceived as impure and immoral.⁶⁰ Ironically, these attacks seemed to have more initial success in humiliating and subjugating women than all of the efforts of Vichy.

Many of the women (almost half of those targeted)⁶¹ were condemned for sleeping with the enemy. Men were judged differently. Of the tens of thousands rounded up for public humiliation, only about 35-50 were men⁶² and none had their heads shaved.⁶³ Most of the men targeted were executed away from the public. Allied soldiers took advantage of the situation and actually sought out the women with the shaved heads (*tondues*) knowing that they were both exploitable (no one would defend them) while reinforcing their belief that the French were collaborators who deserved what was coming to them. Even fathers (who may have previously been abusive) who shaved their own daughters’ head were acting within proscribed moral codes of conduct. Additionally, as French society had shifted their impression of surrendered French soldiers of 1940 as noble victims to something a bit less masculine after 1943, publicly humiliating these women not only put them back in their place, but it also reasserted masculine authority and national honor. Questions about collaboration or complicity (Vichy France, the French police...) were subsumed by public morality plays that psychologically

⁶⁰ Chirstofferson, 186.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Rosbottom, 352.

attempted to reclaim the virility of France and purify its guilt and shame in ways that remind us of medieval witch-hunts. When Jews returned from Ravensbrück and other Nazi camps they found themselves targeted as they too had shaved heads. These photos, in context, allow us to go beyond simple condemnation of collaboration. They should also be eerily familiar to Americans who witnessed similar images of public lynching in the 1930s.



What do these two photos taken that day help us to consider beyond a simplistic story of vengeance? In some respects, these photos are unrepresentative. Seeing a baby is rare. What is not so rare is to see mothers and sisters being targeted together. Is the older woman to the left her mother? It is likely that these women were poor and probably worked as a laundress or waitress. According to witness Charles Wertenbaker, the “patriots” were rounding up the “younger blowsy” women who either collaborated or had participated in the black market. The fact that many small shopkeepers (men and women) had benefited most by the black market was ignored. Wertenbaker also observed that a woman and a boy were selling red wine by

the glass during these events. If we were to expand the frame we would notice that the Catholic cathedral was about 100 meters from the Rue du Cheval Blanc shown here. Again, we must do more than accept the moment captured in a photography.

Postwar Reintegrating Workers from Volunteer Relève & STO

Many French had worked or had been prisoners in Germany. 900,000 POWs and 700,000 workers were repatriated.⁶⁴ Reintegrating them into postwar France was difficult. The reintegration quickly veered into a moralistic tone with misogynistic focus. Women attracted special attention from postwar police investigations. Although only a very small minority of volunteers, women made up more than half of police investigations. Before receiving help, they had to prove their moral standing – that they did nothing morally wrong as workers and were still virgins. Postwar films were filled with self-justifying stock character villains of the unfaithful, weak woman whose husband had been a POW. There were a significant number of divorces immediately after the war amongst the returning POWs who had been gone for almost five years.

Reintegrating Jewish Returnees

Distinguishing the complex narrative of France during World War II was not a priority of the postwar government. A contributing factor may have been the relatively small number of Jews who survived and returned. Additionally, few French were aware of the distinct fate of French Jews and were focused on reclaiming their lives. Concentration camp victims and Resistance fighters (who had been denounced by compatriots) began to return. It was decided not to distinguish the experiences of returnees (whether prisoners of war, forced or volunteer labor, Jews from camps, Resistance fighters, or political deportees) and instead begin the healing process. Complexity was subsumed to the new unifying national myth created by de Gaulle that most of the French were resisters and only a handful were scoundrels. Many French Jews viewed their experiences within the French national narrative. Indeed, Jewish Resistance fighters had generally fought as Frenchmen, not necessarily their Jewish identity. Very few emigrated to Israel and most tried to rebuild their lives in a country whose ideals they had embraced. Some tried to bring attention to their experience in Nazi camps with a December 1944 Yiddish theatre revival performance in Paris. In general, without the ability to distinguish experiences outside the national narrative, one Jewish survivor was asked by her cousin, ‘Where is your suitcase?’⁶⁵



This had two chilling effects: A generation later, school children “remembered” that Jews had been deported because, like everyone else, they had fought the Germans. Secondly, Jews, unable to find the words, deeply traumatized, and afraid of enflaming antisemitism, remained silent for fear that they would be seen as “privileging” their experience. Thus, France

⁶⁴ Christofferson, 126.

⁶⁵ Vinen, *The Unfree French*, 361.

never confronted their complex experience and left collaboration not only unexplored, but alive and untainted for future generations to cling on to.

The Shaping of Memory: French Nationalism and the Need for a Unifying Myth

On August 25, 1944, Charles de Gaulle claimed in a radio speech that France had “liberated itself” (with a particular focus on masculinity) and that all, except for “a handful of scoundrels,” were resisters. On one hand, De Gaulle seemed more interested in the image of France than in the truth of individual and collective French behavior. On the other hand, the *tondue* incidents and other horrific attacks of unjustified vengeance in the street (one innocent viewing the liberation parade from a rooftop was mistaken for a sniper, wrestled down and thrown under a Sherman tank),⁶⁶ reinforced in his mind the need for a unifying symbol. He worked tirelessly to move from an abstract, and at first, little known voice of the Resistance, to become that unifying figurehead. He believed that only a strong unified state could cope with the internal divisions that France. Pride needed to be salvaged. National trauma, defeat, and humility needed to be transformed or perhaps even justified. France’s role in the world (its forces were now back in the fight) as well as its self-image of the bastion of liberty needed to be reasserted. De Gaulle adamantly wanted to become the symbol for France in order to heal divisions. General Eisenhower, who had served in Paris under General Pershing in the interwar years, thought France was ungovernable. Ike liked and respected de Gaulle and indeed saw him as willing and able to take on the burden and responsibility of unifying France and avoid civil war after liberation. Indeed, it was hoped that de Gaulle’s leadership would spare the U.S. from the burden of governing. The key to de Gaulle’s support was a feeling of comradeship amongst divided French society, a sense of resurrected pride and joy, and especially a sense of unity which would require the creation of a unifying mythical historical narrative. De Gaulle represented the vices and virtues of France, which meant, with a willing public, he embodied both sides of the national divide. De Gaulle chose to highlight and embellish heroism and triumph as a reassuring myth to heal divisions, break from the past, and create an idealized version of France emerging in the future. The myth-making attempted to cleanse France’s collective memory from within.

There were problems. De Gaulle represented the conservatives who wished to reassert French nationalism. Meanwhile, it had been the left, mostly the communists, who had consistently (with the exception of 1939-41) fought fascism and later, Vichy. De Gaulle’s performance as “national rescuer” potentially fell a bit flat given the small impact the Free French had during the Normandy landings. As de Gaulle attempted to unify the nation and resurrect national pride how would he deal with the echoes of Vichy? How would he glorify resistance without ceding moral authority to the actual Resistance that he tried to get under his control with Moulin? How would he marginalize the members of the Resistance who claimed that they had fought to preserve the tradition of the Republic while framing the fight in terms of communist ideology that saw the struggle as a peoples’ fight against a Vichy bourgeois elite?

Nothing about de Gaulle was transparent. He equated resistance as part of “eternal France” and talked about a thirty years’ war (World War I and World War II) that showed a consistent narrative of resistance. The Resistance, in his view, had not done much to liberate France and he suggested that many who swelled its ranks only jumped on the bandwagon as the outcome became clearer in 1944. Immediately, memory was being shaped by the politics of an ideological civil war.

This narrative began to take hold as de Gaulle initiated purges within the French government that included Vichy collaborators as well as communists. While celebrating individual resisters, he effectively marginalized the Resistance and its chance to formally shape the narrative. In the ongoing saga of the political civil war, those from the moderate right sided with the communist resistance to reject the purge. De Gaulle effectively argued that France had to look ahead and leave the past behind. This had a great appeal not only amongst the conservatives, but also to a war weary public. By putting reconciliation and forgiveness in the forefront, de Gaulle also appealed to Catholic sensibilities. Reconciliation and calls for unity of course meant the silencing the left. Amnesty laws in 1951-52 allowed the Right to re-enter politics. Now, resistance proved a useful myth, while individual resisters who protested the rush to forget and marginalize the past, were seen as “trouble makers.” We must be careful not to reduce internal divisions and conflicts in France into a simple Left

⁶⁶ Rosbottom, 357.

versus Right political argument. These were not always or only ideological. They also included the different experiences of geographic regions, religious traditions, as well as the different experiences of communities. In this context, de Gaulle presented himself as the symbol of resistance.

Hollowed out by the experience of the occupation, Vichy and the Catholic Church's Collaboration, the French rushed to embrace the myth and push the uncomfortable past behind them. De Gaulle's liberation narrative and its emphasis on its "Frenchness," masculinity, and desire to cleanse the country, fit a bit too nicely with the Vichy narrative. David Drake in *Paris at War* wrote that De Gaulle knew (as did everyone else) the myth was false, but that is precisely where it got its power. It allowed for avoidance and ironically fed the same forces of French nationalism that created Vichy.

According to historian Henry Rousso, De Gaulle had a complex relation to the memory of Pétain.⁶⁷ De Gaulle was seeking a new national revival that focused on values that echoed Vichy. Many gravitated to those values and to the memory of the "hero of Verdun." De Gaulle shrewdly praised Pétain when seeking votes and defended him as a hero who the Vichy tried to act as a shield in defense of France. In this framework, Vichy had been powerless under the Nazi yolk and Pétain served France by salvaging what he could while still maintaining parts of the empire in North Africa. This, of course, was classic Vichy propaganda, but also marginalized the Resistance more. At other times de Gaulle claimed the mantle of leadership in fighting the excesses of Vichy.



The myth of Pétain - circulated after his death in 1951.

Resistance and minimizing Vichy were the continual themes of French memory. Gaullists and communists both wanted to exaggerate the scope of the Resistance, but with different agendas. De Gaulle believed he symbolized the Resistance continuing the tradition of uniformed soldiers fighting the thirty years' struggle for France in the tradition of Verdun. He represented a certain idea of France that placed the resistance within a continuum of French experience and not as something unique during the occupation. Vichy was explained as a handful of traitors to that national ideal. For communists, then marginalized, they did not want the memory of their sacrifice forgotten or whitewashed. The Resistance for them was a popular nation-wide movement against representatives of Vichy bourgeois power. It was agreed that the memory of Jean Moulin could fulfill the needs of both sides. In 1964 his remains were transferred to the Panthéon in Paris in a ceremony that focused on de Gaulle, while also, although clearly in a supporting role, referencing individuals from the Maquis. Even though each Resistance movement had its own heroes and Moulin's unifying leadership existed only for a short time, the ritual worked. It reinforced de Gaulle's role (Moulin had worked for him) while also resurrecting the memory of the resisters. It was a reductionist, but useful myth and mobilized the past for a political purpose that emerged out of conflict in the remnants of the French empire in Africa.



French troops in Algeria.

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) and French Memory

The French military had already faced failure in defending its empire in Indochina at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1953. The war in Algeria pitted the French army against Algerian guerilla forces fighting for the unfulfilled French promises of greater self-rule. Crimes and atrocities were committed on both sides and de Gaulle conceded in 1959 that the Algerians had the right of self-determination. Elements of the French army failed in an attempted coup meant to continue the war. The war had forced contentious memories to resurface. The French right, hoping for a nostalgic reassertion of French power, fought the Algerian guerillas with brutality and feared the connection with the memory of the Maquis that the left was making. The French left not only conflated Vichy memory with that of the French army's efforts in Algeria, but had also risen in opposition to empire and colonialism – the very thing that the myth of Vichy was centered on. The 1964 internment of Moulin served as a way to heal a nation whose past had reemerged through the painful experience of the Algerian War.

⁶⁷ See Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1991) for an excellent analysis of the various forces shaping French interpretation of its wartime experience.

Only after de Gaulle's death in 1970 did the narrative change. At first, after 1968 student riots, there was an over shift and a new fiction that everyone had collaborated took hold. It was a typical over reaction of counter-revolution, but began a new discussion amongst generations untouched physically by the war.

Antisemitism on the Left as Anti-Zionism

Antisemitism, a focus of the Right in France, transferred itself to the French Left who now equated Israel with colonialism. The myth of Israeli colonial aggression had been a new tactic created by Stalin as a Soviet tactic during the Cold War. Stalin sought to keep control over an empire by subjugating the myriad of ethnicities in a police state intent on crushing nationalist movements. He feared a resurgence of Jewish identity and pride with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Stalin attacked the Jewish state by revitalizing the vulgar and Russian-invented *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1902-03) that focused on a mythical international Jewish conspiracy that had, in fact, galvanized Nazi thinking into creating and justifying the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Question." Stalin, and subsequent soviet propagandists, linked a negative image of the "Jew" to "American imperialism." This construct had actually had its origins in France in the 1930s when some had blamed the spread of "American imperialism" on "globalization by the Jewish cinema" and the propaganda of Hollywood and "black jazz." Soviet propaganda built upon this and identified Zionism with both fascism and American imperialism.

In December 1952, at the Czechoslovakia Party Congress, Zionists were accused of exploiting their suffering under Nazism to manipulate non-Jewish sympathy. In that same year Soviet speakers talked of Israeli campaigns to 'exterminate Arab populations in Israel' and accused Israel of conducting a "genocidal policy" that was identical to Hitler's. In 1953, Stalin spoke of Israel as a "bridgehead for U.S. aggression against the Soviet Union and all peace-loving peoples" while also accusing Zionists of collaborating with the Nazis in the extermination of Jews. Zionism was labeled as "racist" and "colonialist."

The Algerian War roused the French Left with the red flags of Arab guerrilla fighters, colonialism, and collaboration. The war also coincided with a reawakening of Jewish memory that had crystallized with the capture of Adolf Eichmann in Argentina by the Israeli Mossad in 1960. The de Gaulle myth was about to face new challenges and French society was once again on the verge of a civil war.

Echoing the problems of encountering traumatic memory, French president Macron in a December 2017 visit to Algeria accepted that the French colonial forces had committed crimes against humanity in the war of independence, but also counselled Algerians to look forward and not dwell on the past.

The Reemergence of the Right

The Algerian war had blackened the memory of the Maquis as guerrilla fighters and had been another blow to French national pride. With a combination of Gaullism, Vichyism, and a variety of other forces, the right-wing National Front Party of France (FN) emerged as a significant player in French politics. Its founder and leader Jean-Marie Le Pen had once been a member of a pro Vichy party and he advocated for wholesale deportation of "non-Europeans" and made light of Nazi Germany's occupation of France. The FN's guiding principles, supplied by French intellectuals, were to rehabilitate the Right, blur the memory between collaboration and resistance, while quelling overt nostalgia for Vichy. This cleverly allowed many French to forget the past, marginalize Pétain's memory, and cling to a new concept of French nationalism focused on national unity. To be sure, this nationalism was to be exclusive and hostile to Jews, freemasons, communists, socialists, and foreigners⁶⁸ and was rooted in Vichy principles. The FN has continued the political civil war by arguing that the French Revolution's (and thus, the French Left) Reign of Terror in the Catholic region of the Vendée (1793-94) was the equivalent to the Nazi genocide.

⁶⁸ Rousso, 197.



FN poster circulated under Jean-Marie Le

Jean-Marie Le Pen who came in second in the 2002 French presidential elections with 20% of the vote. His daughter Marine Le Pen took over leadership of the party and took 3rd place (18%) in the first round of the 2012 presidential election. In January 2014, on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, a group of demonstrators in Paris sang the French national anthem and chanted “Jew, France is not yours.”⁶⁹ In June 2014, the FN received almost 25% of the vote, giving the FN 24 out of France’s 74 seats in the European Parliament. This was an impressive increase compared to the three seats they had won in 2009. April 9, 2017, Marine Le Pen stated, “I don’t think France is responsible for the Vel d’Hiv. I think that generally speaking if there are people responsible, it’s those who were in power at the time. It’s not France.” On April 17, 2017 she tapped into de Gaulle’s myth that Vichy was powerless and manipulated memory by usurping victimhood status by claiming that, “France wasn’t responsible for the Vel d’Hiv...France has been mistreated, in people’s minds, for years.”⁷⁰

Diffused and Confused Memory

The appeal of the National Front (National Rally in 2018) illustrates the problem of mythical collective memory as a defense mechanism for national pride. Resistance had paled in comparison to Vichy, but in creating the myth, De Gaulle insisted that Vichy was under the bondage of the Nazis and that France had ceased to function during the occupation. After initial justice was meted out to the most egregious collaborators, France settled into its reductionist memory. Unable to confront the truth behind complicity France lived in denial, which led to distortion. This distortion was also part of the wartime experience.



Vel d’Hiv memorial.

On August 23, 1942, Jules Gérard Saliege, Archbishop of Toulouse sent a letter to his parishes to be read at mass to protest the Vel d’Hiv roundup. It was a brave, if isolated, statement from a Catholic leader in defense of human rights and moral agency. However, the encyclical rejected “true” French complicity. He concluded with, “France, beloved Fatherland, France which bears in all the consciences of all your children, the tradition of respect of human dignity, chivalrous and generous France, I have no doubt, you are not responsible for these errors.”⁷¹

The mythical construct continues to shape memory. Jacques Chirac in memorializing the Holocaust in 1995 distinguished between “The France that was never at Vichy” and the France that was “correct, generous, faithful to its traditions, to its spirit.”⁷² Chirac’s distinction echoed de Gaulle’s construct and ignores the civil war of identity that mark France’s history. One wonders if recognizing shame by distancing guilt will build solid enough foundations for the future. Time and distance has allowed for more sober and academic reflection. Only recently has France begun to honestly grapple with the responsibility and legacy of the occupation. In 1995 French President Jacques Chirac apologized for the complicit role that French policemen and civil servants played in the *Vel'd'Hiv* Roundup. He was the first president to admit the culpability and complicity of Vichy in the deportations.

This honest, painful confrontation with history paid immediate dividends. Antisemitic acts in France fell by 31% in 2013 in comparison with figures for 2012 according to official figures from the French Jewish community. And yet, the past still lingers and has power. On the other hand, ignorance opens up wounds in ways that knowledge of the past does not.

In 2006, conservative Nicolas Sarkozy ran for President of the Fifth Republic. Uninformed and ignorant of the complexities of the past, he utilized the memory of a “resister” Guy Môquet as a symbol of his campaign. The problem was that Môquet had certainly resisted, but he was a communist who had fought Vichy and not the Germans in 1940. One can only imagine the anger felt by the Left when a candidate from the Right usurped and manipulated one of its martyrs.

⁶⁹ <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/160800/jew-france-is-not-yours-chant-anti-government-demonstrators-in-paris>.

⁷⁰ Nossite, Adam. “Marine Le Pen Denies French Guilt for Rounding Up Jews.” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2017, Europe.

⁷¹ http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20203112.pdf

⁷² <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/17/world/chirac-affirms-france-s-guilt-in-fate-of-jews.html>

Today in France it is the memory of Pétain that is more problematic than Vichy. The “typical” voter on the Left believes that the elites of capitalism betrayed France and despises Pétain. The “typical” voter on the Right believes that Resistance made no sense until 1944 (thus ironically undermining de Gaulle’s claim as leader of the Resistance since 1940), but is more positive towards the memory of Pétain and to Resistance fighters who wore the uniforms of the Free French. Ironically, most of those liberators were not white Frenchmen. Little by little French society continues to wrestle with this painful memory and finds occasional common ground.

The Importance of Responsible Confrontation with a Difficult Past

Reported antisemitic hate crimes in France have more than doubled from 423 in 2014 to 851 in 2015, according to numbers released in a January 7, 2016 report by Human Rights First. “These incidents are increasingly violent,” the report stated.⁷³ This is nothing new in a never-ending conflict between the desire to forget and the desire to remember.⁷⁴



Does support for Marine Le Pen and the parallel rise of populist nationalists in America help people avoid the guilt and shame of a history never fully confronted? On March 10, 2018, former White

House strategist Steve Bannon spoke to re-energize France’s struggling National Front party stating, “Let them call you racists. Let them call you xenophobes. Let them call you nativists,” he said. “Wear it as a badge of honor.”⁷⁵ Racists and bigots in the United States share a similar need to ignore, distance, or justify a past filled with egregious crimes against humanity. Where France struggles with myths and concepts of collaboration and resistance, American racists and authoritarians embrace a mythical, post Reconstructionist fable of the “lost cause” of the “noble” South. Like the myths of Vichy and Gaullist constructs, Americans need to confront its own mythology that continues to fuel racism and separation.

The pot continues to boil. In October 2021, two far-right figures were predicted to secure 32% of the 2021 presidential vote: 15% for Marine Le Pen and... 17% for Eric Zemmour. Zemmour, a former far-right political TV host for France’s CNews (often compared to Fox News), preached that France was being 'invaded' by Muslims. His stark choice, 'Choose between Islam and France.' He described unaccompanied migrant immigrant children are 'thieves, murderers and rapists'.⁷⁶ He is twice convicted for incitement to hatred and is facing multiple other charges. He had been accused by seven women of sexual harassment, but has almost always been acquitted. He positioned himself against "the feminisation of society" and promoted traditional gender roles, denounced so-called LGBT "propaganda" and has compared a recent government initiative to facilitate the integration of transgender children in school to the experiments of Nazi physician Dr Mengele. He believed that French citizens with “non-French” first names should change their name and supported the so-called “great replacement” theory – the notion, also held by white supremacists in the United States, that Western populations were being “replaced” by immigrants. In a September 2021 poll 59% of French voters rejected him. In October 2021, Far-right hardliner Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the National Front Party, expressed his support for Zemmour: "The only difference between Eric and myself is that he is Jewish" which makes it a lot more difficult to accuse him of being a Nazi or a fascist.⁷⁷

Reflections

In hindsight, according to David Drake’s *Paris at War: 1939-1944* we can conclude that a minority of the French had resisted; others aligned or collaborated; others took advantage of wartime shortages and made money on the black market; some hid or rescued Jews; and Parisians did their best to survive while making as few compromises as possible. Easy answers and conclusions are not easy to come by, especially all these years after the defeat and occupation. We must continue to question those who attempt to reduce these experiences by either levelling or equating them without

⁷³ <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/HRF-Breaking-the-Cycle-final.pdf>

⁷⁴ Rousso, 304.

⁷⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/world/europe/steve-bannon-france-national-front.html>

⁷⁶ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211117-hate-speech-trial-for-french-far-right-pundit-zemmour>

⁷⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/25/world/europe/eric-zemmour-france-jewish-bernard-henri-levy.html>

distinction between experiences, guilt, shame, collaboration, and targeting. Reducing history to symbols allows ignorant people to project whatever motive or need they wish to express onto a history without context.

It is important to remember that France has the third highest number of citizens who were recognized as “Righteous Among the Nations.” This is given by Israel to “non-Jews who acted according to the most noble principles of humanity by risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.” Despite all the social pressures and confusion, people risked their lives for their neighbors.



Father Patrick Desbois is an example in responsibility and conscience who does not avoid a difficult past. Working with his organization (www.yahadinunum.org/en) this Catholic priest works in Eastern Europe (and elsewhere) to discover nearly forgotten mass graves. He cares about others outside of his tradition and how others are targeted. When he discovers a Jewish mass grave, he brings a minion of rabbis with him to say the Kaddish, a Jewish prayer traditionally recited in memory of the dead, reclaim their identity, and remember those who were lost.⁷⁸ Father Patrick exemplifies a responsibility to the past for, as Elie Wiesel would assert, “the dead and the living.”

Postwar “Justice”

In 1945, anger flared when de Gaulle pardoned collaborators and commuted death sentences, closed Internment camps, and released collaborators. 350,000 French were referred to French courts. Six of ten were released due to lack of evidence. 125,000 were tried and 100,000 convicted. In the trials the Pétainists portrayed themselves as victims. Two large amnesties were granted by de Gaulle in 1951 and 1953. What happened to the most notorious criminals?

In 1989, French police, after much work, discovered and arrested the *Milice’s* chief of intelligence Paul Touvier, the only Frenchman to be convicted of crimes against humanity. He had taken refuge in a series of monasteries run by fundamentalist Catholics. It is alleged he even received support from officials within the archbishop's palace at Lyons.

Alois Brunner, who worked as Eichmann's assistant engineering deportations, became the commandant of Drancy in 1943. His efforts resulted in the deportation of 24,000 people from Drancy to death camps. After the war he escaped to Egypt (where he ran guns to Algerians fighting to overthrow French and Syria (where he trained their secret service in the methods of the Gestapo). In a 1987 interview: “All of them deserved to die because they were the devil’s agents and human garbage. I have no regrets and I would do it again.”

Pétain: Life imprisonment sentence commuted in 1951. As “hero” of Verdun he symbolized “endurance.”

Laval: Executed for treason in Paris after attempting suicide.

Abetz: Guilty of pillaging Jewish property; deportation of members of the Resistance; deaths of hostages; murder of Georges Mandel. Sentenced twenty years hard labor and banned from living in France for twenty years.

Knochen: Sentenced to death in 1954. In 1958, commuted to life imprisonment. Pardoned by de Gaulle in 1962.

Oberg: Sentenced to death in 1954. In 1958, commuted 20 years hard labor. Pardoned by de Gaulle in 1962.

Bousquet: Acquitted, but given automatic five years for being part of Vichy. Waived as he was seen as a helper of the Resistance. In 1991 he was accused of crimes against humanity, but his trial was delayed by his friend President François Mitterrand. Bousquet was shot in his apartment while awaiting trial.

Darnard: Executed.

Doriot: (Fascist FPP leader) killed when car was strafed.

Déat (FFP): escaped with help of Catholic priests and died of natural causes in Italy in 1955. He had been convicted of treason and sentenced to death in absentia by a French court.

Xavier Vallat: sentenced to ten years and released after two.

Leguay: Indicted for crimes against humanity in 1979. (Since 1964, crimes against humanity have no statute of limitations in France). Unlike the public sensations of trials such as Klaus Barbie, his indictment brought little excitement. He died of cancer in 1989.

⁷⁸ <http://www.yahadinunum.org/patrick-desbois/>

