

Life In Occupied France, 1940-1944: An Overview of Attitudes, Experiences and Choices

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The German Invasion

‘We will win because we are the strongest’ was the litany of optimism within France during the Phoney War (*drôle de guerre*). The fortifications of the Maginot line had appeared to make another German invasion on the scale of 1914 impossible. The morale of French people, wrote Somerset Maugham in March 1940, was one of determination: ‘France is at war, doggedly, resignedly, heroically’, while in the fortified front line ‘a real comradeship exists between officers and men.’

It is worth underlining such sentiments in order to understand the extent of the national trauma when the French found themselves defeated in under six weeks, once Guderian’s Panzer divisions had crossed the Meuse on 13 May. In this very short time the French losses were high, estimated at close to 90,000. Before life under occupation there was the chaos, shock and bewilderment of defeat.

Confusion in the midst of the disaster was expressed in anger and recrimination as well as in sadness and anguish. People looked for someone, anyone, to blame. The efficiency of the German advance was compared to the ragged disarray of the French retreat, and the military catastrophe was compounded by the mass exodus (*exode*) of civilians from the north, including Paris. It was the biggest single movement of population in Europe since the dark ages. Estimates of eight to ten million people took to the roads and railways to escape the German armies. The hope was to get to safety beyond the Loire, but with no idea what would then happen. Goods and mattresses were piled on cars, carts and wheelbarrows: food and lodging were expected to be available, but the villages through which people passed were either empty, or the few rooms and scant provisions already taken. The exodus was mainly one of women, children and older men, and the bulk of the refugees were on foot, overtaken within days by the motorised vanguard of the German troops.

Caught up in the *exode*, two British volunteers in the French Ambulance Corps, Denis Freeman and Douglas Cooper, captured the drama and agony of the civilian nightmare in *The Road to Bordeaux*, one of whose chapters entitled

‘Panic’ was re-issued as a warning pamphlet to the British people, in the case of a German invasion.

Panic there was, but there was also a determination in the minds and actions of many not to be taken by the Germans. There was no such flight from the Italians who threatened the Alpine and Mediterranean border but secured no victories and made no advance. On the Italian battlefield the French army easily held its ground, and had a radically different experience of the war.

Armistice Settlement

There was widespread public sympathy in Britain for the plight of the French people on the roads, and for the 110,000 French soldiers taken off from the Dunkirk beaches alongside double the number of British troops. But opinions hardened when Marshal Philippe Pétain declared on 17 June 1940 in a radio broadcast that he was seeking a ceasefire. Last minute diplomacy between Britain and France, aimed at keeping France in the war, had failed. Its most extraordinary aspect had been the proposal from London of a single Franco-British Union, relayed on 16 June to Paul Reynaud and his government, meeting in Bordeaux. Reynaud could not carry a majority and resigned, handing power to the 84 year-old Marshal, widely revered as the ‘Victor of Verdun’ in 1916. Pétain addressed the nation the next day with the decision to bring an ‘honorable’ end to the hostilities and relieve the plight of the refugees on the roads, but he went further and dedicated his person to France, as a ‘gift’ to the nation to alleviate its misfortune. It was the beginning of a cult of Pétain as the ‘saviour of France for a second time’ which reached epic and religious proportions.

Though Pétain praised the heroic deeds of the army, there was no disguising the extent of the military *débâcle* as the Germans imposed their terms on an Armistice settlement,

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closely modelled on the Allied treatment of Germany at the Treaty of Versailles. Confusion in the ranks of the retreating soldiers was increased by a German promise that they would be given a ticket home if they surrendered. It was a cynical but effective ploy. Tens of thousands did so, or could not avoid capture, and eventually well over 1.6 million French soldiers were transferred to German prisoner of war camps. They were held as hostages to ensure that France fulfilled the letter of the Armistice. In all corners of the nation citizens were encouraged by Pétain to return home and engage in support work for the prisoners, sending parcels and caring for their families, most of whom were in rural areas.

The zones into which France was divided left the country its own government at the spa town of Vichy in the unoccupied south. In the occupied north and west, including Paris and Bordeaux, the German forces appeared initially to act with restraint and even respect (*'les Allemands sont corrects'*). Certain major towns, notably Lyon and Clermont-Ferrand, which had been overrun by the German army, experienced the relief of seeing the Germans retire behind the demarcation line which separated the two zones. The whole of Alsace and the Lorraine area of the Moselle were annexed outright into the German Reich and turned over to the rule of Nazi Gauleiters, who eventually conscripted 200,000 men by force (*les malgré-nous*) into the German army, with appalling losses on the Eastern Front. Lille and its region were cut off from the rest of France and run directly by German military authority from Belgium. Algeria and the French colonies remained under French administration, until most either went over to General de Gaulle and the Free French or were taken by the Allies. If there was one general expectation in 1940 it was that Britain too would soon become victim of the apparently unstoppable German war machine.

Policies of the Vichy Government

Shortly after France had signed the Armistice, the action of the British navy deepened the national humiliation. On 3 July a British force sank a substantial part of the French fleet in the Algerian harbour of Mers-el-Kébir, killing over 1,200 French sailors. The French admiral

had declared that the options given as an ultimatum by the British were unacceptable, whereupon the British opened fire. In Britain the attack was justified to keep the fleet from falling into German hands. Throughout France it was described as a contrived and unprovoked 'massacre'. Anglophobia was rampant. By the end of September 1940 the Battle of Britain substantially moderated opinion, but the events at Mers-el-Kébir had intensified the belief that France was on its own, and needed to find ways of adjusting to the facts of defeat and Occupation.

Adjustment was rationalised in Vichy as a political opportunity. People looked to Pétain for leadership, and the ideology and legislation which emanated from his government expressed his intention to rescue France from the perceived 'decadence' of the Third Republic. A purge of the political Left was widened to target Jews and freemasons. All Jews were debased to second-class citizens: the Germans imposed the wearing of a yellow star, Vichy stamped their identity cards with *Juif* or *Juive*.

The ideology of Pétain and the Vichy government was promoted as a moral necessity. It was codified as a 'National Revolution', championed by idealistic organisations of youth and veteran soldiers, and endorsed by most of the Catholic Church. The whole programme was enabled by the 'full powers' voted overwhelmingly to Pétain by the National Assembly on 10 July. The Marshal confirmed himself as head (*Chef*) of an explicitly authoritarian regime, the 'État Français'. The Republic was discarded: its structures dismantled. By 1942 internment camps were full of immigrant Jews, political suspects, and those deemed morally subversive.

The Vichy regime was not imposed by the Germans. It had its own volition and political heritage. It made its own decisions to create an understanding with the Occupiers, relayed by Pétain to the people as reciprocal collaboration, after a meeting with Hitler at Montoire on 24 October. In the phrase which Robert Paxton made history in 1972, Vichy France was both 'Old Guard and New Order'.

Seeds of Resistance

Within a few months it was evident just how divisive Vichy policies were, though Pétain continued to be the focus of

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hope and was largely absolved from blame. By 1941 the voices of scattered individuals who opposed the Armistice as a capitulation, and who found ways of expressing their hostility to the Occupiers, began to merge with those protesting against Vichy's internal policies or refusing '*la voie de la collaboration*' announced by Pétain.

This small minority of individual protest, refusal and revolt in 1940-41 showed that choices could still be made at a time when the dominance of the Occupying forces and the moral and patriotic hold of Pétain appeared to close down the possibility of alternatives.

Acts of defiance through hastily written leaflets of optimism and dissent, and calls for people to stand firm, had a localised, but cumulative, impact. The broadcast *Appel* by General Charles de Gaulle from London on 18 June 1940 was one such individual act. It was heard by very few in France, and his name was relatively unknown, but the fact that a General was continuing the war, with access to the BBC, made contact with London and his Free French (*les Français libres*) an aspiration for many of those seeking ways of resisting the Occupation. Intelligence activity, refuge for British aircrew, and guides across the Demarcation line and the Pyrenees became the basis of secret networks (*réseaux*) of resistance, which depended on communication with British and French agencies in London, while other small groups created embryo movements (*mouvements*) of resistance, mainly through the writing, printing and distribution of clandestine tracts and news sheets. Refusal was urban-centred at first, until events of 1942-43 radically changed the nature and possibilities of alternative action.

Life under German Occupation

Heavy German requisitions and variables of climate and soil exacerbated the problems of food. The monoculture regions of the Mediterranean, although in the unoccupied zone until November 1942, were harder hit than areas of mixed farming. Food sorties into the countryside supplemented the severe rationing: urban-dwellers described peasant farmers generally as grasping, but kept their own sources of eggs, butter and meat to themselves. Long queues outside shops were the visible sign of shortages; the covert side were the shadowy figures

returning from the country in time to beat the curfew. Outwitting the authorities for extra food was most people's first brush with illegality. The mechanisms of survival allowed ingenuity and the black market to flourish.

The Germans in the occupied towns could not be avoided. They did not keep to themselves. Their bands played in the squares, they frequented the best restaurants, the tourist sites and the concert halls, and their officers were billeted in private houses, the setting for the first resistance novel, *Le Silence de la Mer*, by Vercors. They took photographs of everything. The French response can only be adequately assessed through local studies. Localities developed their own thresholds of tolerance. Silence, evasion and hostility were universal. Public gestures of defiance soon gave way to more effective clandestine activity.

The norm was to accommodate life to the German presence without any show of deference. Rampant opportunism was not widespread, but it was very visible, particularly in Paris, where pro-Nazi and collaborationist groups rivalled each other for German patronage, distributed with divide-and-rule dexterity by Otto Abetz, the German ambassador. Throughout France certain kinds of sociability, or power relationships, led a very small minority into open courtship of individual Germans and sexual encounters.

The art of life was to 'get by' (*débrouiller*). Ancient recipes, cures and crafts were re-discovered. The nightly curfew in towns led to more time spent on reading, hobbies and writing letters. The birth rate started to rise for the first time in over 50 years. Social structures based on family and friends were strengthened. Religious rites increased as reassurance, but public acts of penance quickly palled. Amateur sport, promoted by the Vichy Minister, the tennis star Jean Borotra, flourished. Cinemas were packed, until the Germans picked on male youths at the exit to be sent as labour to Germany. Asserting something as French, whether product, culture or behaviour became the touchstone of day-to-day resilience.

Rumour was rife and strangers were obsessively watched. When the Occupation was extended to the whole of mainland France in November 1942, arrests, raids, and street searches brought a repressive reality into all areas. It exacerbated divisions. Denunciations of Jews, foreigners,

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resisters, and ‘subversives’ were received in their hundreds by both the Vichy and German police forces, though it is now clear that only a small proportion were investigated. The Germans and Vichy had their own censorship systems from the beginning. To these were added the Gestapo and the Vichy *Milice*. It was only gradually realised that all letters were subject to interception by Vichy officials, who read thousands every week before sending them on.

With travel and transport heavily restricted or impossible, the image is of a society, confined to its localities, turned in on itself, pre-occupied with everyday necessities and careful to avoid the dangers of confrontation. This image is accurate for most of the population during most of the Occupation. Both active collaboration and active resistance broke the mould.

Resistance and Collaboration

By 1942 the diffuse groups of refusal and revolt began to act collectively as organised Resistance. The search was for more unity and effectiveness, greater variety of action, and structures which would survive individual arrests and infiltration by German or Vichy agents. During 1942-43 these objectives were realised, making the Resistance an alternative society, in which some resisters were permanently clandestine, moving from place to place, and others were effective in their regular jobs, through sabotage in factories and on the railways, access to vital information in government employment, use of materials in town halls for false identity cards, and smuggling explosives from mines and quarry works.

The German conscription of French labour to work in Germany was a major turning point in public response to the Occupation. The Vichy government, in the person of Pierre Laval, had always favoured bargaining and negotiation with the Germans. In June 1942 he set up a scheme of voluntary labour recruitment, in return for prisoners of war (*la Relève*). The results fell far short of the increasing numbers demanded by Fritz Sauckel, with the result that Laval made the scheme into a compulsory draft of young workers in February 1943 (*Service du travail obligatoire*). Pro-Vichy notables advised workers and their families to comply, as a matter of duty. The clandestine press called on workers to refuse. Choices

for ordinary people polarised: fear of the alternatives now bit deeply into lives previously unaffected. Over 600,000 workers were sent to Germany.

The countryside was the securest place to avoid the draft: there were farms of relatives, dense woods and sparsely inhabited mountain regions in which thousands of rebellious workers (*réfractaires*) found they could hide. Anti-fascist refugees and resisters on the run had already started looking for a rural extension to their activity. Together with an expanding minority of the *réfractaires* they created armed bands (*maquis*) in the rural vastness. Urban movements of resisters quickly saw the potential. Allied agents buttressed the *maquis* with their initiative, and brought the expectation of parachuted arms and ammunition. In some places the peasantry only tolerated extra labour: in others they colluded actively or passively with the *maquis*. Certain places nurtured an outlaw culture of resistance where whole villages were involved. The history of the *maquis* is one of specific rural communities as well as the escalation of resistance into effective military action (*la lutte armée*).

The labour draft was dubbed by the Resistance as ‘deportation’. It stirred people into action. By contrast the deportation of Jews, brutally enforced by the Germans and the Vichy police in mass round-ups in Paris in July 1942 and throughout the summer in the south, provoked fewer acts of refusal among the French as a whole. Jews were hidden in areas such as the Cévennes and the plateau of Vivarais-Lignon where a Protestant tradition of refuge had deep social and cultural roots. Significantly a few Catholic leaders in the south openly denounced the inhumanity of the deportations: the break with their own hierarchy carried the moral necessity of resistance into new territory. Vichy collaborated in the deportation of immigrant Jews, children included. Most of the Church and most of the population averted their eyes, but outrage at the French internment camps, notably Gurs and Les Milles in the south and the transit camp of Drancy outside Paris, expanded humanitarian resistance. Neither Laval nor Pétain pursued the Germans for information on the ultimate destination of the convoys, which deported almost 76,000 Jews to the death camps in the east. Less than 3,000 survived.

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The committed anti-fascism of refugees, including Jews, was one striking element which reinforced French recruits into the *maquis* and urban units. The active Resistance of men and women, with infrastructures of support and information, now represented a sizeable minority of opinion, and used a comprehensive range of civilian skills. In contrast, virulent anti-Semitism fed into collaboration and strengthened the extremes within the special police forces. The Vichy *Milice* was launched in early 1943 to hunt down resisters of all political persuasions, foreigners and Jews. The *Milice* marked the open descent of Vichy into its own style of fascism, with special courts-martial, and dependence on the Germans for arms and a co-ordinated military role against the *maquis*. By 1944 it represented only a tiny fragment of the population. Majority opinion, evident in intercepted letters and Prefectoral reports, expressed fear of the effects of military conflict of any kind, despite the widespread hopes placed in the Allies.

The imminence of the Allied invasions was accompanied by extensive Allied bombing, aimed at railway sidings, factories and installations working for the Germans, but causing heavy civilian casualties in surrounding areas. Over 60,000 civilians died in bombing throughout the war from both sides. The population affected by the Allied bombs wrestled with their ambivalent reactions, as did those subjected to German reprisals after resistance activity in their locality, though the barbarity of German atrocities, notably at Ascq, Tulle, Oradour-sur-Glane and Maillé, provoked only new levels of hatred of the Occupiers and collaborators. Every act of German torture and repression deepened polarities among the French, and it was polarisation which took centre stage in the liberational struggles and the purge of collaborators in the summer and autumn of 1944, before and after the Allied landings in Normandy and Provence.

The illusions of a French role in the Nazi new order had never gained any popular hold. There was always contempt for conspicuous collaboration. The Liberation was achieved by an Allied victory in which committed Resistance inside and outside France played a significant military and moral role. Resistance re-established the values of the Republic and enabled France to be one of the victors in the ultimate defeat of Nazi Germany. It

provided a narrative of courage and refusal and turned the tables on the disasters of 1940, but dealing with the memory and legacy of Vichy and the divisions of the dark years of the Occupation became a persistent syndrome in post-war France.



Suggested Reading

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