

France and World War Two - History

Defeat in 1940 was the most traumatic event of the 20th century for France. What made it traumatic was not just the fact of defeat but the context. For France had won the First World War a mere 20 years earlier, though at a terrible cost (1.4 million military dead). Then France (like other European societies) was hit by the Depression and the political turmoil that came in its wake, including ideological polarization, the growth of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and right-wing, fascist-style 'leagues'. Finally, from 1933, France had to confront the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, including Hitler's aggressive foreign policy. France was deeply divided on the eve of war (legacy of Popular Front of 1936; appeasement; the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact and changed position of the PCF). It also suffered a deeper malaise about modernization, as France seemed unable to match the industrial development of Germany, the USA and the USSR. Defeat in 1940 thus seemed to confirm the worst fears of French weakness. With 8 million refugees (the 'exodus') it also brought physical disruption.

The nature and circumstances of the defeat make the ascendancy of Pétain over the French easier to understand. A man of 84 in 1940, his reputation was that of the general who had defended Verdun in 1916 and restored morale in the army after mutinies of 1917. He was deputy leader of final war government in 1940 and argued for the Armistice, which was signed on 22 June. *How inevitable was this decision?* Continuation of the war from the colonies or Britain was an option. But it was left to the little-known de Gaulle to proclaim from London in his retrospectively famous radio address of 18 June 1940 that the battle was lost but the war continued. Condemned by Pétain, this led to the Free French in exile.

Only with time was de Gaulle's stance vindicated. Pétain's position in 1940 rested on embodying the apparently inevitable. And he did so in a form that psychologically reassured and comforted the French – a protective father figure. He claimed to shield the French from the occupier. 'I make a gift of my person to France'. He told the French that although the war lost, France could now go back to normal. 'Rentrez chez vous' (return home) had physical as well as metaphorical, meaning. He also spoke of national expiation and revival - reassuring the French that if they 'collaborated' and the Germans showed magnanimity, France could be rebuilt on the foundations of all that was good and true in the nation, beginning with the family. It was this discourse, which so exactly fitted overwhelming mood after the defeat, that created (in the words of one French historian) 'forty million *pétainistes*'. It explains the personality cult.

2. Vichy France.

This was the first foundation stone of Vichy. The second was the creation of a new regime. On 10 July 1940, over 500 (of nearly thousand) deputies and senators gathered at spa town of Vichy in south central France and voted 'full powers' to Pétain to direct the government until after war (expected soon). Technically, Pétain was merely interim leader (and the constitution of 1875 simply suspended). In reality he was much more. The Third Republic was replaced by a paternalistic authority-figure to protect the nation and work for its redemption. Pétain acted as head of a new regime - the Etat Français (French state) - in Vichy. The Germans had divided France in 1940. Vichy's writ ran throughout France but it was in the 'free zone' that its authority was clearest.

The mood of 1940 was thus swiftly moulded into a new regime. The longer-term fortunes of Vichy were determined by two factors: the political visions and projects of Pétain and his associates and collaboration with the Germans.

2.1 The 'National Revolution' and Vichy's politics.

Pétain soon made it clear that Vichy stood for much more than a broadly defined, politically neutral guardianship of national interests. Independently of German pressure, Pétain in summer and autumn of 1940 defined the political and social principles of new regime – the 'National Revolution'.

Pétain rejected Republican values as 'artificial', and in particular scorned the parliamentary system of the Third Republic. He dismissed democracy as the enthrallment to entrenched interests, capturing anxieties at industrialization and the power of big business and organized labour. Instead, for Pétain, 'authority' was the basis of the state and the guarantor of 'true' liberty - that of the individual securely attached to groups hierarchically organized in a society where all knew their place. Vichy deliberately promoted a backward-looking view of society. It celebrated traditional gender roles (*femme-mère* and pro-natalism); rural France (return to the land and the Peasant Corporation); and the image of the worker as artisan not proletarian. It sought to abolish the class conflict of industrial society and replace it with a harmonious 'corporatist' society. Conservative Catholic propaganda provided much of the language for its social policies.

Yet Vichy France, as the regime became known, also had a *modernizing* current. France had to manage a war economy and develop its industrial capacity to meet German demands. Hence the technocrats and economic planners at Ministry of Industrial Production under Bichelonne, who sought to build the

economic infrastructure and plan the economy, and also the syndicalists (trade unionists) who thought workers could be integrated into society by participation in running the economy and social reforms (Bélin, the Labour Charter). But overall, the main discourse was anti-modern and even some civil servants at the Ministry of Industrial Production saw France's vocation as agrarian and artisan.

Vichy opposed all that stood in the way of this 'revolution' - Third Republic politicians, communists, socialists. But its supporters came from across the political spectrum. Naturally the Action Française and traditional right were there – though the real Fascists scorned it and collaborated directly with the Germans in Paris. But it was also a coalition of the disaffected - from disabused Republican politicians like Laval, Pétain's key associate, to dissident socialists and syndicalists who hoped that Vichy had broken the political stalemate of the Third Republic and allowed the integration of workers into nation. Vichy attracted this mixed bag of support precisely because it was one answer to the deeper disorientation of 1930s France already referred to (see Jackson, *Dark Years*).

2.2 Vichy's collaboration with Germans.

Pétain based his decision to 'collaborate' in 1940 on the calculation that Vichy had a margin of autonomy from the Germans. He and Laval hoped the Germans would accept this through self-interest.¹ In reality, Hitler despised the French as decadent (though not slav *Untermenschen*, to be colonized or eliminated) and there to be exploited to the hilt. Therefore, Vichy could only establish its 'autonomy' if it had something to bargain with. The one thing that Hitler really considered a gauge of good faith was French re-entry into war on German side.

¹ See speech of 11 October 1940.

But that would have contradicted Pétain's central logic – which was to remove the French from the war. Vichy's remaining bargaining counter was the neutrality of the navy and empire. But this was likewise a symbol of French withdrawal from the conflict. Darlan and Laval went as far as they could to facilitate German use of colonies. But at heart, the French had little to offer the Germans that the Germans were not already taking - as the economic exploitation of France showed.² The Germans had few reasons to make more concessions to Vichy. When they felt directly threatened by the Allied invasion of North Africa in late 1942 they tore up the illusion of Vichy autonomy and occupied the whole country.

If Vichy enjoyed little power to protect the French against actions the Germans might otherwise have taken, why did it collaborate? Retrospectively justifying the 'shield' idea, Pétain declared in 1944: 'During four years, I have only had one goal, to protect you from worse things befalling you.' This was also Laval and Pétain's defence at their trials in 1945. But in 1971 a young American historian, Robert Paxton, wrote a seminal book that dissected this argument and argued that in reality collaboration was the price Vichy paid for the right to implement its own political agenda - the National Revolution, which left the Germans indifferent - and to repress its own perceived enemies, which fitted into German plans. Hence Vichy action against communists, resisters etc. did the Germans' work for them without their needing to insist on it. This was also true in relation to Vichy collaboration with the Nazi genocide of European Jews. Vichy had its own anti-Semitic agenda. The price it paid for being allowed to deal with French Jews in its own particular way was turning over foreign Jews (of whom

²Indemnity of 400m. francs a day (58% of state budget); manipulation of French exchange rate to buy French goods and businesses on favourable terms; directly dismantled French industry down to 1943; drafted French labour for Germany from 1943.

there were many in France) to the Nazis. E.g. the round-up of the Vél d'Hiv, July 1942. Overall, 70,000 people were deported, 45,000 of them Jews and only 2-3,000 survived. Because it was divisive and ineffectual, Vichy by 1942 had lost much of its support especially with intensive German demands for French labour.

3. Resistance.

3.1 Motives.

Granted the complicating factor of Vichy (there were two possible enemies), what were the motives of those who resisted? One explanation is personal, especially at the beginning, when any sense of community was fragmented and there was fear and isolation - the 'discontinuity of 1940'.³ This was Sartre's paradox: 'We were never so free as under the Occupation.' It favoured mavericks e.g.

Emmanuel Astier de la Vigerie, who remarked: 'I'm going to stick my neck out and say that I believe one could only be a Resister if one was maladjusted.'⁴

But there were also strong pre-war political continuities. Thus, conservative army officers and civil servants of Organisation Civile et Militaire could not accept defeat by, and collaboration with, the Germans, though they initially accepted the good faith of Pétain. Thus Henry Frenay, a conservative Catholic army officer who escaped from a German POW camp, was loyal to Pétain but fiercely hostile to the Germans, and so set up an intelligence network. Or Catholic democrats, involved in pre-war attempts at a Catholic/Republican synthesis, opposed the Germans and came to accuse Vichy of collaboration (e.g. François de Menthon, ex-president of Catholic youth movement, who founded *Liberté* with southern

³ Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.76.

⁴ In *The Sorow and the Pity* (1970)

catholic intellectuals). The small French Protestant minority was deeply committed to the Republic (guarantor of its civil liberties) and used its long-established communities to mount escape routes in the south. Communists who might observe, or be troubled by, the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, often opposed Vichy in a continuing battle against the *French* right inherited from the Popular Front years of 1936-7.

From 1942, although there was still nothing automatic about Resistance, the existence of networks and movements acted as third motive - joining established community to escape 'Sartre's paradox'.

3.2 Values.

Along with the gradual emergence of hostility to Vichy (as well as the Germans) as a focus for Resistance, certain pre-war continuities suggest that Resistance was unlikely to be politically neutral. It was not just *against* occupation and collaboration, but also stood *for* certain values - especially those attacked by Vichy. The lowest common denominator of Resistance was a strong reassertion of the French republican tradition - not the discredited Third Republic but basic values identified with the Revolution of 1789 and subsequent moments embodying the revolutionary myth of the nation (1848, 1870-1, Dreyfus Affair, Popular Front). There was also a vaguely socialistic consensus on post-war reconstruction. In a parallel, but opposed, manner to Vichy, the Resistance focused on resolving the 1930s malaise that had contributed to defeat in 1940.

This meant that the political complexion of the Resistance was broadly left wing. It was, in fact, a classic Republican *rassemblement*, or gathering, with no groups formed on purely party lines. Communist movements - FTP and Front

National - contained many non-Communists, while other big groups, like Combat or Libération-Sud, Catholic and socialist respectively, had a mixed political base.

3.3 Forms of Resistance.

These were multiple and included military goals (sabotage, escape, intelligence, the *maquis*); welfare (hiding Jews and the politically persecuted, false papers); and perhaps most important of all, *communication and opinion* i.e. opposing the apparent finality of 1940 and recreating alternative moral communities, and future perspectives, to those of Vichy. Hence the crucial role played by the press, with a host of papers. It was estimated in February 1944 that the monthly circulation of the entire Resistance press was 1.5 million, with the main papers printing 100,000 -200,000 copies each (*Franc-Tireur*, 1 Feb. 1944). *Défense de France* summed up reason why so many movements centred on a paper (1943):

The simple fact of the existence of clandestine newspapers proves the Resistance exists. Each of them presupposes the existence of hundreds of men or women who show a complete disregard for death - typesetters, drivers, transporters, deliverers, distributors...The Resistance exists, therefore it is possible.⁵

3.4 Significance of Resistance.

All social classes and both genders were present in Resistance. Certain groups were more likely to participate, whether by political inclination or opportunity – e.g. workers and intellectuals. But it was also a matter of definition. Activities that some did not count as resistance were in reality part of resistance, for example those of peasants and women who often carried out support functions that were more dangerous than formal membership of a network. Yet in reality, and

⁵ C. Bellanger, *Presse clandestine, 1940-1944*, p.164.

however we count it, resistance activity involved a tiny minority - several hundred thousand at most, out of 40 million.

The Resistance had little military importance except perhaps in aftermath of D Day. This was equally true of the Free French around De Gaulle, and the government in exile in London and then in North Africa (there were increasingly close, but never easy, links between the Free French and the home resistance). It was the Anglo-American effort that freed France, and without that no liberation would have occurred. But both the Resistance and the Free French provided the political and spiritual values that allowed the French to renew Republicanism and to recreate a sense of nationhood following the Liberation – even if this occurred at the price of a mythic history of the war in which the importance of both the Resistance and the Free French was vastly exaggerated.

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Much of the more recent work on World War Two France has underlined the complexities and ambiguities of French experience (e.g. H. Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*). Vichy was not a regime that protected the French as a whole. Rather it used the circumstances of 1940 to embark on a new episode in a specifically internal French conflict. Once the war over, those who could not escape association with Vichy took refuge in the 'shield' argument (used at Pétain and Laval's trials). Others sought to disguise their identification with the regime. But any broad French consensus on Vichy had vanished by 1942, and only a minority supported it till end. Conversely, fewer supported the Resistance than was later suggested by the (doubtless necessary) “myth-histories” of a resurgent France rooted in the Resistance and the Free French – though recent revision

has suggested that the degree of active support (e.g. hiding Jews) may have been greater than assumed twenty years ago.

The majority of the French concentrated on survival. This, significantly, is the theme of many later films on the period - *Une Affaire de Femmes* (Claude Chabrol, 1988), *Au Revoir les Enfants* (1987, Louis Malle). These films portray the French people simply trying to get by. Robert Gildea takes the argument a stage further in *Marianne in Chains* – where even some forms of ‘collaboration’ become a form of survival. But the films also make the vital point that survival was not morally or politically neutral. It carried its own complicity in the events that occurred during the occupation. This one of the reasons why World War Two has (until very recently) continued to trouble the French and prove deeply controversial for historians of France

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