

## Vichy France, Collaboration and Resistance : A lecture

by Chris Millington

### **Preface**

*I gave this lecture on my course 'From War to Revolution: France 1914-1968' at Swansea University this year. The text below is exactly the text that I used in class - so bear in mind it was intended to be read aloud.*

**NB:** *I have removed references from the document to save space. In writing the lecture I referred to several key works, all of which are required readings for the student of Vichy. They include: John F. Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France* (NY/London: OUP, 1994); Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1972); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-44* (Oxford, 2001); Stanley Hoffmann, 'Collaborationism in France during World War Two', *Journal of Modern History*, 40 (1968), 375-395; John F. Sweets "Hold that Pendulum! Redefining Fascism, Collaborationism and Resistance in France" *French Historical Studies* 15:4 (Fall 1988): 731-58; Fabian Lemmes, 'Collaboration in wartime France, 1940-1944', *European Review of History* 15.2 (2007), 157-177; R. Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation*; R. Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France* (Oxford, 1978); R. Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis* (Oxford, 1994); Philippe Burrin, *Living with Defeat* - also published as *France under the Germans*.*

### **Lecture**

Following the armistice in June 1940, France was divided into several zones: a small zone in the north-east of France known as the 'forbidden zone', an Occupied Zone in the North (which included the Atlantic coastline) and an Unoccupied Zone in the South. An internal border, known as the Demarcation Line, separated the two zones. Germany wanted to keep the Empire out of Allied hands and Hitler believed the best solution was for France to defend the Empire itself. The unoccupied zone was therefore technically an independent state. This zone was known as Vichy France, named after the town where the French government set up its headquarters. Pétain was head of the Vichy state and he governed with a team of ministers.

The period 1940-1944 is known as the Dark Years in France and not without good reason. During these years, 650, 000 civilian workers were deported to work in Germany; 75 000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz; 30, 000 French civilians were shot as hostages or members of the Resistance, another 60,000 were sent to concentration camps.

Yet in August 1944, when France was liberated, General Charles de Gaulle, recognised leader of the French forces, was asked to proclaim the restoration of the

Republic. He refused: on the grounds that the Republic had never ceased to exist. What did he mean? He meant that Republican France, the 'true' France, had always existed – in the form of himself and the Resistance. Vichy was an abnormality, an aberration – it was 'not really France'.

According to this history, the horrors inflicted on the French people had been the work of the Germans; Pétain had worked hard to spare the French people from German excesses – he was the shield and de Gaulle had been the sword. The Resistance movements had incarnated the 'true' France and the mass of the population had been behind it. This is now known as the Gaullist Resistance myth. In the post-war years, it provided a comforting image of French wartime conduct at a time when national unity was vital to the reconstruction of the country. Intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers reinforced the myth and it went largely unchallenged until the 1970s.

From the 1970s though, the myth began to crumble. Films such as Marcel Ophüls *The Sorrow and The Pity* showed the wartime French to have been selfish and *attentiste* – which means they preferred to 'wait and see' what would happen, rather than resist. In 1972, American historian Robert Paxton's book *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, shattered the resistance myth for good. Based on research in French and German archives, Paxton showed that collaboration was not a policy imposed on France, but one that originated in France itself. Furthermore, Paxton concluded that the majority of French people did little to oppose Vichy; in fact, their very apathy had allowed the regime to remain in place. The resistance myth was thus turned on its head – the French had not been a nation of resisters but a nation of collaborators. There was a danger though that one myth would be replaced by another – but since the 1980s a more balanced view of Vichy has emerged, which we'll look at later.

Today's lecture will look at the issues of resistance and collaboration in light of this scholarship.

### **Collaboration**

From summer 1940 to November 1942 (when Germany occupied the whole of France), Pétain and his government made a concerted effort to step beyond the armistice and agree a more permanent treaty with Hitler. Historian Stanley Hoffmann has called this 'collaboration d'état' or state collaboration. State collaboration was informed by the view that Hitler would defeat England, win the war, and that a new German and Nazi order would prevail in Europe. Vichy therefore needed to get the best deal possible for France.

1) State collaboration reached its highpoint in May 1941 when France agreed the so-called Protocols of Paris with Germany. The Protocols were a set of agreements in which France hoped to regain some political powers in return for military concessions

to Germany. Germany wanted access to French military facilities and bases in Syria, so to exploit the Iraqi rebellion against the British. Meanwhile, France wanted a new era of Franco-German co-operation and political concessions from the occupier. When the Allies invaded Syria and the Germans no longer needed French bases there, Hitler lost interest in negotiations.

The story of the Protocols of Paris is representative of the pitfalls of state collaboration. We see a Germany willing to negotiate **only** when it suited it; and the French overestimating their importance to Hitler because Vichy was desperate to reach a permanent arrangement with Germany. In reality, Hitler was more concerned with planning the rest of the war than hammering out a French peace treaty.

2) Collaboration was not totally pragmatic: Certainly there were men in France who were fervent collaborators. In the occupied zone, committed French fascists vied with each other, and with Vichy, for political influence in Paris. Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union gave collaboration a further ideological base.

3) Laval seen after the war as arch collaborator; the evil mastermind behind the policy. According to the Gaullist resistance myth, Laval was the real force behind collaboration, a shady character who operated without Marshal Pétain's consent. Laval was a former deputy and had been prime minister for a time during the thirties. In Vichy France, Pierre Laval, saw collaboration as part of a long-term strategy of Franco-German reconciliation. He was powerful at Vichy because his close relationship with the German ambassador in Paris, Otto Abetz, meant he had the ear of the Occupier. As Vichy's prime minister, in June 1942, Laval infamously stated 'I desire the victory of Germany because without it Bolshevism would install itself everywhere.' Yet since the breaking of the resistance myth, historians have shown that Pétain was just as bound up in collaboration as Laval; the Marshal was not an innocent old man.

4) There were other issues that influenced collaboration. Vichy went above and beyond what the Germans asked it to do because it hoped to stave off German intervention in French domestic affairs. The Forced Labour Service is a prime example. When Vichy failed to meet the target for volunteers, Laval drew up a law in September 1942 that allowed the French government to recruit workers by force. By the end of the year, the target had been reached.

The story of French relations with Germany between 1940 and 1942 is therefore one of Vichy persistently trying to negotiate with a very indifferent Hitler. Germany allowed Vichy to believe that France would be a partner in Hitler's New Order and not just a satellite state. In reality, the reverse was true. Vichy therefore grossly *overestimated* the degree to which France mattered to Hitler. France was only useful to the extent that Germany could milk the French economy. In fact, practically the only

negotiations the Germans were willing to enter into were economic. For Hitler, there was no connection between economic and political matters.

By November 1942 one could argue that Vichy had had 'negative' success – France had not re-entered the war and the southern zone was still free. This state of affairs was shattered when the Americans landed in North Africa on 8 November 1942. At 7 a.m on 11 November 1942, German troops crossed the demarcation line. France was now occupied in its entirety.

### **Resistance**

Let's now move on to the resistance. When considering the resistance, a distinction must be made between Charles de Gaulle's 'Free French' movement, which was based in London, and the resistance movements based in France itself. They were separate entities and though their histories begin to converge by the end of 1941, they nevertheless remained distinct and there was sometimes tension between the two. De Gaulle arrived in London on 17 June 1940, the day after Paul Reynaud's government fell. On 18 June he broadcast to the French nation via the BBC – his speech is on the handout.

He stated that France had lost the battle but not the war. The government had given into panic and, forgetting its honour, had delivered the country to servitude. This speech is taken as the beginning of the French resistance – it has acquired huge symbolic importance, and a plaque with part of the speech on it can be found today under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, near to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Yet in June 1940, few French actually knew who de Gaulle was, let alone listened to his speech. In fact, though de Gaulle claimed to embody French sovereignty, he had attracted no great political personalities to London and the French Empire had largely remained loyal to Vichy.

De Gaulle's relations with the Allies were difficult. Only the British government immediately recognised him as leader of what they called the 'Free French'. The British vetted all speeches made to France via the BBC – de Gaulle was permitted to speak for five minutes each evening. If Britain wanted to punish de Gaulle they would withdraw this privilege. Following a disastrous Anglo-French attack on the Senegalese port of Dakar in September 1940, Britain froze de Gaulle out of all military planning involving France.

But what of contact between de Gaulle and France itself? As well as de Gaulle's nightly BBC broadcasts, the Free French co-operated with the newly created British Special Operations Executive. By the end of 1941 the Free French had sent 29 agents to

France. Yet even 18 months into the war, the Free French and de Gaulle knew virtually *nothing* about the resistance within France.

This did not deter de Gaulle from claiming to speak for all French. In September 1941 de Gaulle set up a National Committee with himself at its head – it began to take on the appearance of a provisional government, though it was not recognised as such. Furthermore, on 2 October 1941 de Gaulle announced that he was directing resistance in France. The problem was that this was patently not the case. He had no means of applying his orders in France. Lack of information and contact meant that the French resistance was not integrated into any strategy that the Free French had.

In 1940, the resistance in France was disjointed and diverse; there were many different groups. Before mid-1942, few people had probably heard of the resistance movements. It is only in the second half of 1942 that we see the first signs of **mass** public disaffection from Vichy. On 14 July 1942, for example, the resistance movements requested the French demonstrate in the street wearing the national colours. 66 demonstrations took place, two-thirds of them in the south. This was the first mass public demonstration of discontent.

One of the problems confronting resisters was the division of the country. Apart from the practical obstacle of the demarcation line, the different conditions in the Occupied and Unoccupied zones complicated matters. It was much more difficult for groups and newspapers to survive in the German-occupied North than in the South. In the north the resistance was fragmented and groups found it difficult to produce propaganda. But, in a sense, the need for propaganda in the north was less urgent. The French living in the Occupied Zone didn't need to be made aware of the conditions of war – the German presence sufficed for this.

But in Vichy France, the resistance had to work harder to break public complacency because, if many French were anti-German, fewer were anti-Vichy. Even some early resisters were sympathetic to the regime and to Pétain. Only by the end of 1941 did the southern resistance movements come to realise that the underground war against Germany necessitated a form of civil war against Vichy.

The first tangible contacts between the Resistance in France and de Gaulle in London came through a man named Jean Moulin. Moulin first met de Gaulle in London on 25 October 1941. He provided the general with information and suggested that resistance movements could make a military contribution to the war effort. De Gaulle sent Moulin back to France to persuade the Southern movements to recognise de Gaulle as their leader and co-ordinate their meagre military forces under Free French control. In return the Resistance would receive material aid from London.

Resistance leaders may not have wanted to bring their movements under the general but they desperately needed funds and arms. Some resisters were suspicious that de Gaulle was not committed to the restoration of democracy in France. To reassure them, the general wrote a 'Declaration to the Resistance Movements' of June 1942 in which he stressed his commitment to democracy and promised elections after the Liberation. On 13 July 1942, the British agreed that the Free French now represented *all* French opposed to the armistice – inside and outside France.

There was a section of the resistance that would never recognise de Gaulle as its leader – the Communists. Daladier had outlawed the French communist party (PCF) in August 1939, forcing it underground. Because of the Soviet Union's non-aggression pact with Hitler, the PCF followed a neutral line until June 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. It denounced the war as an imperialist venture and condemned both Vichy and the German occupier in equal measure.

After June 1941, Moscow ordered French communists to disrupt factory production, commit acts of sabotage and organise armed groups. Activists assassinated German officers and soldiers, sometimes in broad daylight. But this was not the beginning of an armed insurrection. These murders were limited to a handful of men who possessed the necessary weapons and strong stomach for killing. This paramilitary action made them different from other resistance groups, including de Gaulle, who condemned communist anti-German violence as it often led to the shooting of hostages.

Even by mid-1941 most non-communist resistance movements still opposed violence. Rather they encouraged boycotts of collaborationist press and the sabotage of industry.

The tactics of the communist resisters raises an interesting question: What counted as an act of resistance? I would suggest that when we think of the resistance we probably think of the tactics the communists used – assassinations, attacks on trains, the sabotage of communications. But the underground press was one of the most important forms of resistance. Newspapers served as a source of information and of moral support, urging the population to help patriots and containing debates about the future of France. These papers were not mass produced and it's impossible to know how many people read the newspapers. In some cases only a handful were printed. They were be left on train carriages, on park benches or in the foyers of apartment blocks. People read them and then left them for someone else.

### **The Ordinary French**

So far then we've looked only at what we may term 'activists' of collaboration and resistance - that is, the people who were actually involved collaborating with the Germans and those who were members of resistance movements. But what about the ordinary French, the mass of the population? Historians have disagreed about how to judge the actions of the ordinary French.

According to Robert Paxton, immediately after the defeat, the French public were in shock. The growing hardship that French civilians encountered in daily life meant little attention was paid to politics. Most people were worried more about getting by from day-to-day. Such apathy gave Vichy a broadly compliant public support base. In the early years of the war, anti-German feeling was not as widespread as one might expect - and it was actually weaker than anti-Allied feeling, especially after the Allies bombed parts of France. It was only in 1943, when the Forced Labour Service began to affect many French that the tide of public opinion turned definitively against Vichy and Germany. Paxton estimates that 2% of the adult male population were resisters, so about 400,000 French. He estimates that 2 million people, about 10% of the population, read the underground newspapers.

Consequently, Paxton concludes that the 'overwhelming majority' of Frenchmen, though they longed to be rid of the Germans, were not prepared to do it by violence. Paxton's most controversial claim is that anyone in France who did not *actively* oppose the regime through the Resistance was essentially a collaborator in a 'functional' sense - a sort of collaboration by default.

The second historian I shall look at is Philippe Burrin. Burrin rejects the term collaboration and favours 'accommodation'. He argues that from winter 1940 most of the French population wanted victory for England and were sceptical or hostile to the policy of collaboration. This rejection of collaboration though was neither general nor immediate. The French were grateful to Vichy for sparing them total German occupation and they believed that the government *was* working to improve their living conditions. By spring 1941 though, the postal censorship authorities reported that the public was 'hardly favourable at all to Vichy' and even affectionate feelings for Pétain were declining. This feeling grew during 1941 with the German attack on the Soviet Union and increasingly repressive measures against acts of resistance, such as hostage taking. By spring 1942, Vichy surveillance reports showed that 'Down with Pétain propaganda' was no longer a rarity and that images of the Marshal were no longer greeted with applause in cinemas. In June 1942, Laval's wish for a German victory was met with quote 'intense emotion' and 'general stupefaction'.<sup>182</sup> By October 1942, many French had come to believe that there was no longer any justification for the Vichy regime.

Burrin concludes that for the period of June 1940-November 1942 it is reasonable to suggest that between 1/5-1/6 of ALL French 'favoured collaboration' – so between 6.6 million and 8 million. However, Burrin makes the important point that support for collaboration was not continuous, coherent or committed from all people. Most believed that collaboration was an expedient measure. They were not confident in an English victory, therefore, if collaboration could win concessions for France then why not? A lot of French simply wanted to 'get through it all'.<sup>187</sup>

Finally historian John Sweets has criticised historians such as Paxton for replacing 'the myth of the nation of resisters' with another myth – that of the 'nation of collaborators'. Sweets argues that the popularity of the Vichy regime declined from 1941, much earlier than Paxton suggests (1943). Sweets questions Paxton's definitions of collaboration and resistance – in short did apathy really mean collaboration, and was resistance limited to the Resistance movements themselves? Clandestine newspapers and graffiti probably didn't win people over to the resistance but they would have reinforced anti-Vichy and anti-German feeling. If Paxton argues that the apathy of the French public created an atmosphere that was favourable to Vichy, Sweets counters that in 1943-44 public opinion was overwhelmingly favourable to the resistance.

Sweets also reminds us that French reactions during 1940-1944 were diverse – they involved a multitude of daily choices over which one had limited control. Furthermore, should we limit the definition to members of active resistance groups? What about the men and women who contributed to the resistance in a meaningful way but who were not on membership lists, who were not killed, who were not deported or arrested? Sweets gives several examples. First, the village priests who sheltered resistance fighters from the Germans. Second, the men and women who gave work, food and shelter to resisters? Third, the doctors who signed false certificates of physical incapacity for men called to work in Germany. Fourth, workers who while working in factories producing goods for Germany produced faulty parts for German airplane motors. These people were not 'official' resisters but their contribution was not negligible. Sweets argues then that what is required is '...a reformulation of the definition of resistance is required'.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of this lecture, I stress several key points to students:

1) We must bear in mind that the opportunities for collaboration and resistance were affected by one's location. To resist in the North was much more difficult due to the presence of German soldiers and the German authorities. On the other hand, in the South, though we could argue that resistance groups had more room for manoeuvre, it

was more difficult to convince ordinary citizens to resist. This was because the Occupier was not visible (at least before November 1942) and many French still held an affection for Petain - and one question we might ask is 'Was resistance to the Germans the same as resistance to Vichy?'

2) If geography affected collaboration and resistance, then so did chronology. When examining all things to do with Vichy we must consider the date, and with it the course of both the war and the Vichy regime. Developments in the wider war affected France. For example, it was only after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union that the French communist party passed to active resistance. Before then, it had been hamstrung because Germany and the USSR were technically allies following the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939. As for Vichy, the regime in 1944 was much different to the regime in 1940. As the war progressed Vichy developed a much more repressive apparatus, the most visible expression of which was the paramilitary Milice under Joseph Darnand. The Milice was charged with hunting down resisters and often executed them without trial. This represented an escalation in the war between the resistance and Vichy, with evident consequences for resistance groups.

3) Collaboration and resistance were not monolithic. We must remember that there were many different resistance groups even if it is tempting to think of the resistance as a single movement under de Gaulle. Each group had its own agenda and politics - and the communists never accepted de Gaulle as their leader. We must bear in mind too that there were different types of collaboration, from Vichy to the Parisian fascists - what did each want?

Finally, if we no longer accept that the French resisted en masse, is there a danger of replacing the resistance myth with a collaboration myth? It is worth asking ourselves how satisfactory the terms 'resistance' and 'collaboration' actually are. When historians argue that the French resisted or collaborated, should we ask whether the people at the time actually understood the choice between the two? Was it even a question of choosing one or the other? The Vichy years were complex - they should be viewed in shades of grey, not black and white.