THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

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The French Resistance consisted of a very small minority of the French population. Estimates of the number involved range from 45,000 to 300,000, at most two percent of the adult population. Another ten per cent were willing to read the underground newspapers, but most French people were simply not prepared to fight.

Why were such a nationalistic people unwilling to take arms against one of their oldest enemies? One reason for their compliance with the armistice was the relief they felt at not having to go through a second debilitating war in twenty years - especially in the face of the modern weapons and "the frightening dynamism of the new Germany".[1] This fear of war was so accentuated that French soldiers who had not yet heard about the armistice or had decided to fight on in spite of it were murdered by irate civilians.

Cowardice was the reason for some of the inertia, but this was rationalized in part by claiming that even if the Germans were there to stay "the sweetness of French life and the good humor of French wine would, in a few generations, turn the Germans into members of a higher civilization."[2]

There were many who felt that war with Fascist Germany would only strengthen Stalin and the Communists. French Nazis and leftist pacifists - both for obvious reasons - also opposed the war. There were even people who deplored the pre-war degeneracy of French life and felt a national resurrection would result from France's fall. André Gide was one of this group, though he later changed his mind.

In Vichy France, there was yet another reason for passiveness rather than resistance, and that was Pétain himself or rather his legend. Many felt gratitude for his keeping them from direct German control (until the end of 1942), and even those who wanted to resist were confused as to who the enemy was - the Germans or the Vichy government.

Also many who lived in the French countryside were simply not touched enough by the German presence to have it make any difference in their lives. This and the other reasons not to resist meant the number of partisans was small, especially in the beginning. It was "the most elementary promptings of normalcy in the summer of 1940, the urge to return to home and job, (that) started many Frenchmen down a path of everyday complicity that led gradually and eventually to active assistance to German measures undreamed of in 1940."[3]

In spite of all the reasons to comply with the occupation, some men and women had to resist. Some had to fight for their self-respect; they were shamed by the countries who were still fighting

and felt the German presence in France was unbearable. Others, such as the Communists and Socialists, were fighting not so much against the Germans as for a new order of society. A third group which included many Catholics resisted for humanitarian reasons; they protested the anti-semitism and forced-labor policies of the totalitarian regime.

Resistance began slowly; French and German police records "reveal no serious problems of dissent for the regime until well into 1941."[4] One reason for this slow reaction was the confusion of the Communists, engendered by the Russian-German pact, as to what their role should be. One year after the French Armistice, in June, 1941, Hitler cleared this up for them by invading Russia. "Resistance also requires some hope, and until late in the war, throwing the Germans back across the Rhine seemed beyond mortal strength."[5] With the German defeats at the hands of the British and Russians and the entry of the U.S. into the war, resistance increased.

Also at that time, the first underground newspapers were circulated in the unoccupied zone, the three most important being Combat, Libération, and Franc-Tireur (which are still published today). By the spring of 1942, there were thirty underground papers in the occupied zone. There were many problems in putting out a paper, "but its compensation is out of all proportion to its risks, especially in view of the fact that every other large-scale activity is much more dangerous and less far-reaching in effect."[6]

The "Libération" group put out a pamphlet entitled Advice to Those in the Occupied Zone, some of which was: pretend you don't understand German if they ask directions; don't attend their free public concerts or watch their parades or raise your hat to them or buy from a shop which says Man spricht Deutsch; and number 21, "Display perfect indifference; but secretly feed your anger. It will serve you."[7]

Three large resistance groups in the unoccupied zone began forming as early as the summer of 1940 and published their own newspapers soon after. "Combat", led by Captain Henri Frenay, was made up primarily of army officers and Christian Democrats. This group eventually had a 'secret army' presumably for use at a time of liberation, a railroad sabotage group, a group of paper forgers, and "a service called N.A.P. the purpose of which was to 'colonize' the civil service with Resistance people."[8]

"Libération", led by Emmanuel d'Astier was more revolutionary in aim and hoped to unite all leftists - most of its 20,000 members were from the trade unions or universities. Many intellectuals who had fled the north in 1940 helped to shape the policies, and a paramilitary group was formed to organize strikes and attacks on trains carrying war material to Germany.

The third large group, with a membership of 30,000 by 1942 was the "Franc-Tireur" made up of Paris intellectuals and unorthodox

leftists. A smaller group organized by the Catholic priest, Father Chaillet, was the "Témoignage Chrétien" which specialized in rescuing Jewish children by placing them in French Catholic families or with Swiss families. "Libérer et Federer" was a Socialist group centered in Toulouse which later formed Maquis units.

In the North, it was much different and more dangerous. There were no intellectuals discussing plans in cafés, no groups in the tens of thousands and no doubt about the enemy. The sight of Germans and collaborators in their towns filled the French with disgust which they showed in small ways like directing them to Métro stations way out of their way; bus conductors would not stop where Germans wanted to get off; and shop clerks sold them what the French would not buy.

Each town had its small resistance group, but there was little coordination because of the need for secrecy. Eventually, however, three main groups were formed with considerable assistance form DeGaulle's London headquarters. He sent Colonel Passy of the B.C.R.A. (Bureau Central de Renseignements et d'Action) to coordinate and arrange financing for the partisan effort and "it was largely thanks to this organization that the spontaneous and somewhat incoherent resistance of the French people was given shape and equipment."[9]

"Libération-Nord" was made up primarily of Socialists and Catholic trade unionists. They put out a paper which reached a circulation of 50,000 a week at one time, and by 1943 were organized well enough to have a civil and military chief in each department.

The "O.C.M." (Organization Civile et Militaire) was composed of soldiers, members of the civil service and professional classes. Many operated from government offices in the Paris area and were therefore of special value to London.

The most influential organization in the North, however, was the "F.N." (Front National) which eventually operated extensively in both zones. The leaders of this group were Communists, Villon and Marrane and they tried with some degree of success to incorporate several facets of the population so that after the war they would have mass backing for their policies. The "F.N.'s greatest success was in staging the Corsican insurrection in September, 1943, from whence came the name Maquis (literally "thicket" behind which the fighters hid).

Besides publishing papers, issuing propaganda and staging insurrections, the Resistance was active in gathering intelligence both for the Allies and for the F.F.I. (French Forces of the Interior), based in London. Colonel Rémy and Colonel Passy set up networks and gave financial assistance to the intelligence gatherers. There was also an underground network to forge papers for and otherwise assist P.O.W.s, some Jews and allied servicemen in escaping. "The fairest estimate is that over 4,000 servicemen returned to England before the Allied landing in Normandy."[11]

Actual armed resistance by large groups of men did not begin until February 16, 1943, when the German regime introduced the S.T.O. (Service du Travail Obligatoire). After Stalingrad, German laborers were needed in the army, so thousands of young men were required in the factories. They were "rounded up in the streets, in theatres and cinemas, the families of dodgers were threatened with reprisals and ration cards were delivered only on production of a labour certificate."[12] Drafting peasants who had been fairly quiescent until then turned another large group against the Germans. The total number fleeing to the mountains in the Alps, the Massif Central and the Pyrenees was probably less than 100,000, but this meant large amounts of food and arms had to be found. Some turned to theft to live, and the first draft-card burners raided S.T.O. offices. "The guerrilla, which Pétain and others had feared in 1940 would destroy France, had begun."[13]

There were many forces working against the Resistance, both from within and without. The Communists caused resentment and fear in some of the more conservative groups, especially the group of army officers. Officers would sometimes kill the franc-tireurs partisans as bandits and put up notices such as: "We, members of the Secret Army, have this morning executed such-and-such, belonging to the franc-tireurs partisans, who committed acts of brigandage contrary to the mission which we imposed upon ourselves: to serve France honestly."[14]

Another inter-resistance point of contention was the quarrel between those who favored attentisme, a policy of waiting for the allied landing before taking action, and those who favored immediate action. DeGaulle and others were against assassinations because they wasted lives and served no purpose. In the autumn of 1941, he appealed for attentisme, saying, "It is absolutely natural and absolutely right that Germans should be killed by Frenchmen. If the Germans did not wish to receive death at our hands, they had only to stay home... But there are tactics in war,"[15] and he ordered them not to kill Germans until he was in a position to attack.

One of the partisans greatest enemies was the Milice, "an instrument of repression more feared and hated than the SS troops themselves."[16] This was a group of eager French collaborators under the leadership of Joseph Darnand; by 1944 there were about 45,000 of them. They joined an object for fear of revolution, to avoid the S.T.O. or because of a "law and order" mentality. With police and the military guard units there may have been as many Frenchmen putting down resistance as there were active participants in it.

The Germans took the greatest toll of partisan lives as well as hostages and ordinary civilians as reprisal methods. In 1941, the Feldkommandant of Nantes was assassinated and the Germans killed over 100 people in return. Three years later, in a rage over increasing attacks by the Maquis after D-Day, an S.S. contingent on its way to

Normandy shot and burned to death 600 citizens of Oradour, a small town in central France. Altogether about 30,000 in the Resistance were shot and 112,000 sent to Germany, only 35,000 of whom returned, and those in very bad condition.

After D-Day, the number of resistance fighters seemed to increase, but this was due in part to the sudden appearance of the "Septembrisards", those who bought cheap armlets to parade with the true partisans. True guerilla activity was stepped up, however, with an emphasis on preventing German troops from regrouping or reaching Normandy. Also, many parts of France, including most of Brittany, were liberated by the combined forces of the Maquis and F.F.I. "This guerilla war was of unquestionable value to the Allies; General Eisenhower said they hastened victory by two months."[17]

And what was the result of all this effort when peace came? One would think that those who fought to free their country would have some voice in its post-war government, but that was not to be for most of the Resistance. Rather it was DeGaulle who immediately filled the gap left by the German retreat. The French majority did not want the social upheaval of a Communist takeover, and the Communists looked around after liberation and found that the bulk of their troops had gone home to take up their old lives.

Bitterness filled many French after the war against the traitors and collaborators, 4,500 of whom were killed by the partisans, 767 executed and 38,000 sent to prison. There was also bitterness about the partisan brutality, much of it blamed on the Communists. Indeed, those valiant few who had surmounted incredible odds to wage their fight against oppression found that they were generally overlooked. The knowledge of the contribution that they had made, despite their small numbers, would be their only reward.

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Footnotes

1. Robert O. Paxton, Vichy France, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1972.
2. Alexander Werth, France 1940-1955, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1956, p. 169.
3. Paxton, p. 19.
4. Werth, p. 38.
5. Paxton, p. 291.
6. Raoul Aglion, The Fighting French, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1943, p. 270.
7. Aglion, p. 266.
8. Werth, p. 139
9. Werth, p. 137.
10. Airey Neave, The Escape Room, Pantheon Books, New York, 1970.
11. Werth, p. 156.
12. Paxton, p. 293.
13. Paxton, p. 293.
14. Charles DeGaulle, The Call to Honour, The Viking Press, 1955.
15. Alfred Cobban, "France", Hitler's Europe, ed. Arnold and Veronica Toynbee, Oxford University Press, London, 1954, p. 422.
16. Werth, p. 164.