

Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis, 1940–1942: complexités de la politique de collaboration

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In August 1985 the French weekly *L'Événement du jeudi* published a dossier of articles by professional historians titled 'Pétain, héros ou traître?' to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Marshal's trial for high treason as Vichy head of state. Readers reacted passionately to the forum, flooding the magazine with letters either denouncing or defending the man and the regime. In the latter category, one text stuck out. Written by a José Casenave, a veteran of the 1940 campaign who subsequently joined the Resistance and specialised in shepherding escaped POWs and downed Allied aviators across the Spanish border, it naively heralded Pétain as 'le premier résistant de France qui n'a pas cédé aux Nazis un mètre carré de terrain' and inaccurately dismissed de Gaulle, who had seen combat as a tank commander in 1940, as 'un colonel habillé en général qui n'a jamais vu de près un casque allemand, n'a jamais participé à un combat, et a seulement bradé les départements français de notre empire colonial'.⁽¹⁾ This apparent incongruity between action and ideology struck Henry Rousso, who at the time was writing his classic *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours*. Toward the end of the book Rousso cited the letter as evidence of 'strange' ideological categories such as 'pétaino-gaullistes' and 'résistants-pétainistes-antigaullistes', concluding blandly that 'les divisions de l'Occupation ne furent pas aussi nettement délimitées que le temps évolué a fini par le laisser croire'.⁽²⁾

His caution in broaching the subject was understandable given the sensitive ethical dimensions of Vichy historiography. Since the early 1970s, the Gaullist myth of a nation unified behind the Resistance and fundamentally opposed, in spirit if not always in action, to the policies of the Etat Français, had been debunked by a series of works documenting the depth and willingness of Franco-German state collaboration, particularly with regard to the deportation of Jews.⁽³⁾ Henceforth all those who had failed to engage in active resistance were held morally responsible for Vichy's crimes. As Pascal Ory put it in *Les Collaborateurs*, 'à la limite, tout Français resté sur un territoire occupé par l'armée allemande ou dépendant

de son bon vouloir a, à quelque degré, collaboré avec elle'.[\(4\)](#)

Anyone who dared challenge the Resistance-Collaboration dichotomy by suggesting that hybrid varieties of thought and conduct might link the two poles risked being seen as an apologist for Vichy. A high-profile target of this view was Louis Malle's film *Lacombe Lucien* (1975), which depicted a teenage peasant's entry into the German-financed 'French Gestapo' as the result of chance and material motivations (being disinherited by his family and rejected by a local Resistance cell) rather than reactionary ideological convictions or some innate penchant for malevolence. Though archival research has subsequently shown this portrait to be historically accurate, Malle suffered venomous attacks in the press from the Left and even more damning praise from the extreme Right.[\(5\)](#) He struggled to shake the stigma left by the scandal, which later led to his making *Au revoir les enfants* (1989), an impassioned dramatisation of the human cost exacted by Vichy anti-Semitism and the quiet heroism of those French citizens who sheltered Jews during the war.

By the mid-1980s the ethical taboo that informed virtually all popular and academic accounts of the Occupation was beginning to crack under pressure from scholars both in and outside France who, like Rousso, realised that the ideological topography of France's 'dark years' was much more complex than had previously been acknowledged. The first significant break occurred in 1986 with the publication of John Sweets's *Choices in Vichy France*, a nuanced social and political history of everyday citizens' conduct in the Auvergne which challenged the Manichean portrait of Clermont-Ferrand burned into the collective consciousness by the television broadcast of Marcel Ophüls's documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in 1981.[\(6\)](#) Sweets's book was not well received in France, but it opened the way for a new vein of scholarship devoted to exploring the ideological ambiguities of the period. A series of international conferences held in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in a stream of publications that transformed Vichy historiography by warning against the automatic conflation of Vichy with Nazi fascism.[\(7\)](#)

Kitson's *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis* represents the culmination of this historiographic shift. By tackling head-on one of the most striking paradoxes of the Occupation – the French counter-intelligence service's pursuit and arrest of approximately 2000 German spies between 1940 and 1942, several dozen of whom were executed – Kitson offers substantial new insight into the dynamics of state collaboration. In addition to revealing the political logic behind French counter-espionage, Kitson highlights the mutual suspicion it created between German and French officials, and demonstrates just how inadequate the old Collaboration–Resistance paradigm is for comprehending the ambiguities inherent in many of the Vichy's policies and French citizens' attitudes toward the regime.

Like most groundbreaking histories, the book draws on a previously untapped archive: the so-called 'Fonds de Moscou', comprised of secret French counter-intelligence documents seized by the Germans in 1943 following their invasion of the southern zone. First transported to Berlin for analysis, the 1,400 cartons were then confiscated by the Soviets at the end of the war and transferred to Moscow. A long process of negotiation between the Russian and French governments following the disintegration of the USSR resulted in the documents' repatriation at the end of the 1990s. Today the nearly three tons of paper have come to rest in the Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT) at the Château de Vincennes. As Kitson notes in his introduction, the archive has almost certainly not survived intact, but it has not been 'sanitised' either, as have most private collections donated by former intelligence operatives, to yield a wholly favourable, pro-Resistance image of Vichy counter-espionage. Kitson draws extensively on several related archives to fill gaps and verify information gleaned from the Moscow files, including those of Pétain's Council of Ministers, the French Armistice Commission, the Ministry of the Interior and the police. The private papers and post-war memoirs of intelligence agents also have their place in the narrative, but because of their unavoidably self-interested and selective nature are used only as a supplement to primary sources dating from the war.

The first part of the book, divided into three short chapters, lays out the administrative structure and objectives of German espionage in southern France and North Africa, as well as the sociological profile of those who became spies. Kitson begins by noting that the number of German intelligence operatives in southern France more than doubled between the signing of the armistice in June 1940 and July 1941, a move which despite Vichy's military impotence and genuine commitment to collaboration was integral to the

Reich's strategy of pacifying France with as few military resources as possible in order to focus on the conquest of Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Other factors also came into play: internecine rivalries between Wehrmacht and SS intelligence units, each jockeying for administrative supremacy; more important, widespread suspicion that Pétain, the celebrated 'Victor of Verdun' from the Great War, would double-cross the Germans by dealing secretly with the Allies and having the French army re-arm itself for a future insurrection.

Though today we know that Pétain had no intention of playing such a 'double game,' during the first six months of the Occupation German intelligence discovered what appeared to be compelling evidence, including secret stockpiling of arms by the armistice army, proposals to reconstitute the French air force in North Africa, training of soldiers in guerrilla warfare and with arms (planes and artillery) explicitly forbidden by the armistice agreement, and most crucially, Pétain's dismissal of Laval as prime minister in December 1940 – a decision acclaimed by the French public as a sign of the Marshal's supposed distaste for collaboration. In this context, intensive spying provided Germany a means of verifying that the Etat Français remained too weak to influence the war militarily, but strong enough to suppress internal dissent and protect the Reich's systematic economic pillage of the country through legal and illegal (black market) channels. Spies thus infiltrated virtually all levels of Vichy administration, including the army, paramilitary organisations such as the Légion des combattants and the Chantiers de la jeunesse, the police, and even the special units assigned to guard Pétain and prime ministers Laval and Darlan. Given the expansive range of French sources exploited by Kitson, it is perhaps surprising that he relied almost exclusively on secondary literature for this section rather than consulting the surviving archives of the Abwehr, Gestapo and Sicherheitsdienst. Doing so might have provided more detail and a useful contrast in perspective to the French view that informs the narrative.

In the third chapter Kitson details the recruitment of spies using arrest and interrogation records, military justice files, and letters they wrote from prison. The majority (80 per cent or more, according to arrest records) were French citizens motivated by a wide range of ideological and personal factors. In the first category, Kitson identifies two primary groups: nationalists from Brittany, Alsace-Lorraine, Algeria, or Morocco who aspired to independence with German aid, and hard-core collaborationists/anti-Communists who viewed Vichy's policies as weak and ineffective. The second group included persons in search of adventure and intrigue, those with a score to settle with the Vichy or the Resistance, detainees desperate to regain their freedom, and others simply blackmailed into service by the Germans. However, the most common type of agent was the profiteer keen to secure material rewards (extra food, inter-zone passes and cash) during a period of ever-increasing hardship.

With virtually unlimited financial means at their disposal thanks to ongoing devaluation of the franc versus the mark, the Germans paid handsomely for information. Depending on its utility, each tip was worth from a few hundred to as much as 30,000 francs, allowing especially active informers to amass large fortunes during the first two years of the war. Under the direction of Hugo Geissler, chief of the Gestapo's office in Vichy, most recruits were integrated gradually into the web of espionage by completing a series of small missions before moving on to bigger targets. The most important agents were issued German credentials as members of the Red Cross, one of the many branches of the Armistice Commission, journalists or salespeople – a tactic which guaranteed their immunity to prosecution under French law. Indeed, among the forty or so spies eventually tried and executed by Vichy there were no German citizens, only French and Italian nationals.

The second part of the book, also comprising three chapters, examines the structure of French counter-espionage, the mentalities of the army and police officers involved in the operation and the tactics they used in the field. Because French counter-espionage was forbidden by the armistice agreement, the pre-war administrative structure had to be overhauled and concealed. The army's 'Fifth Bureau' was thus reorganised into two units: a clandestine branch based in Marseille under the cover of a business called the *Entreprise générale des travaux ruraux* (TR) and an officially attested section known as the *Bureau des menées anti-nationales* (BMA) whose stated purpose was to quash Gaullist and Communist activity. With offices in each military region of southern France and North Africa, the BMA was particularly crucial to the success of

French counter-intelligence. A newly created sub-unit of the national police, the so-called Bureau de la surveillance du territoire (ST), also participated. Although the TR took primary responsibility for intelligence gathering and analysis, the other two groups provided supplementary information and essential logistical support for clandestine TR operations. In practice, it was almost always members of the ST who actually arrested and interrogated enemy spies.

Kitson makes clear from the outset that the overarching goal of the network, whose efficiency often suffered from a lack of effective coordination, was to preserve French administrative and territorial sovereignty against all foreign intruders, thereby ensuring that Vichy maintained as much political autonomy, power and credibility as possible within the framework of collaboration. The logic of this mission was dictated not only by France's unique geo-political situation, but by the mentalities of the army officers responsible for counter-intelligence. Fundamentally anti-German because of their pre-war duel against Nazi spies, they were also committed opponents of Communism and highly suspicious of British and Gaullist intentions in the wake of the disastrous 1940 campaign, especially with regard to the French Empire. As one of the few genuinely valuable bargaining chips in Vichy's negotiations with the Reich, the colonies had to be jealously protected against potential usurpation.

Yet if the TR, BMA and ST tracked and arrested enemy agents from all camps, they targeted the Germans most aggressively since the future liberation of France would inevitably hinge on ousting the occupiers. Most of the French intelligence community viewed the Occupation as a distasteful but temporary necessity which could end only with the defeat of Germany – hence their support for Vichy's programme of internal social reforms known as the National Revolution.⁽⁸⁾ On this point it is telling that most special services officers sided with General Henri Giraud rather than de Gaulle following the Nazi occupation of the southern zone in 1942. Kitson points out that while hostility vis-à-vis the Germans remained constant, attitudes toward the British varied in response to events such as the armed conflicts between Anglo-Gaullist and Vichy forces at Dakar (September 1940), in Syria (July 1941) and in Madagascar (May 1942). Even at moments of crisis, anti-Allied sentiment never outweighed Germanophobia. A secret report drawn up in March 1942 identifying enemy weapons against which the French should prepare to defend themselves included ten belonging to the Wehrmacht versus one British and one American.

In its daily operations, French counter-intelligence turned a blind eye to Allied spying as long as it was directed against the Germans rather than Vichy. When British or Gaullist operatives were arrested (Kitson cites the relatively low number of 177 for the whole of 1941), it was often because their perceived amateurism and ease of infiltration by German double agents risked exposing the TR's or BMA's own activities. On occasion the French special services engineered the release or escape of Allied agents from prison after their arrest and forwarded reports on German military activities to London, but only after carefully removing potentially sensitive information about Vichy. As a rule the special services avoided contact with interior resistance movements, for these represented a direct challenge to Vichy's sovereignty, but the TR did work directly with the Combat movement, its leader Henri Frenay's credentials as a former army officer entitling him to special treatment.

The book's final chapters, which are in many ways its most surprising and compelling, document the tactics of French counter-intelligence and examine the fate of arrested spies. According to TR head Colonel Paul Paillole, his group carried out approximately fifty covert assassinations from 1940 to 1942, but that option was risky diplomatically and therefore reserved for only the most severe threats. Since citizens of the Reich were immune to prosecution, they had to be released after being formally identified by German authorities. Yet the process of identification was far from transparent, in many cases requiring well over a year thanks to the French practice of keeping high-value prisoners in solitary confinement and moving them frequently from place to place. Internal French documents and letters written by spies themselves while in custody attest that the ST and regular police frequently practiced torture including severe beatings, water immersion, and anal electrocution via the infamous 'bibi chatouilleur' which would later resurface during the Algerian War. In order to uphold the moral tenets of the National Revolution and prevent information leaks, the special services also detained French women suspected of sleeping with German or Italian armistice commission officials and, in an unexpected foreshadowing of the Liberation, even used head shaving as

punishment. In the end, the French military tribunals judged only French and Italian nationals. The most common sentence was imprisonment and/or hard labour for up to 10 years; execution was recommended in approximately 100 cases, but only about twenty of these were actually carried out.

In his conclusion Kitson unpacks the paradoxical logic of Vichy's spy hunt and evaluates its historiographic significance. Whereas special services agents, Paillole in particular, have always maintained that their activity was a natural complement to the Resistance, Kitson takes a more critical and balanced view. On the one hand, he notes that counter-espionage reflected a sincere Germanophobia among army officers which extended throughout Vichy's administrative hierarchy. On the other, he is careful to emphasise that French counter-espionage showed substantially more anti-German resolve than in any other facet of Vichy's domestic or foreign policy and that being anti-German should not necessarily be equated with being pro-Resistance. Functionally speaking, the French special services did much more to defend Vichy's political sovereignty and in so doing, to support state collaboration, than they did to aid the Resistance. Most important, Kitson is careful to assert that the clandestine battle between Vichy's special services and Nazi spies should in no way overshadow or excuse already well-documented areas of Franco-German ideological partnership such as their persecution of Jews and Communists.

One area for which this study has significant implications is the impact of Vichy propaganda, especially newsreels, on the public's (mis)understanding and tacit acceptance of the regime through the end of 1941. Kitson touches briefly on the anti-collaborationist press and poster campaign encouraging French citizens to avoid contact with Germans in their daily lives, commenting later that 'l'aspect antiallemand du contre-espionnage va à l'encontre des positions diplomatiques ouvertement déclarées par le gouvernement et, de ce fait, doit se faire sans le soutien total d'un public non averti' (p. 196). Yet the French army's resolve to fight any enemy which threatened Vichy's sovereignty was expressed explicitly in a series of government-financed documentary films produced by André Brouillard, a long-time member of the Fifth Bureau and TR, in conjunction with a civilian filmmaker named André Verdet-Kléber. Collectively known as *La France en Marche*, these films celebrated the cult of Pétain, the Empire, the National Revolution, and the rebuilding of the armistice army, which was shown actively training in the air, at sea, and on land. Potential enemies were never specifically named, allowing spectators to project their own ideological prejudices into the simulated combat they saw on screen. *La France en Marche* and its sister series, the weekly newsreel *France-Actualités Pathé-Gaumont*, were produced in Marseille and distributed throughout southern France and the colonies. Moreover, both were extremely popular with audiences, in sharp contrast to the German-made *Actualités Mondiales* shown in the northern zone.⁽⁹⁾ My research on Vichy cinematic propaganda suggests that they crafted the seductive myth of a 'Vichy résistantialiste' which successfully encouraged spectators to suspend disbelief in the realities of state collaboration, at least during the first year and a half of the war. The upshot is that many average French citizens shared the mentalities of the counter-espionage agents who let themselves believe that supporting Vichy without actively engaging in resistance might somehow lead to liberation.

This is but one example of the fruitful dialogue that Kitson's deft mix of social, political, and diplomatic history will initiate with other scholars of the Occupation. There is little to criticise here, and the book has deservedly received almost unanimous praise in both Europe and North America, with the exception of a few former French counter-espionage officers who bristled at not being firmly classified as resisters.⁽¹⁰⁾ By highlighting Vichy's simultaneous pursuit of sovereignty and collaboration, Kitson has enhanced our appreciation for the paradoxes that defined the regime. He has also lifted the stigma of apology long attached to studying anti-German sentiment within the Etat Français and opened the way for further exploration of the conflicts that often lay below the surface of Franco-German relations. All historians of wartime France owe Kitson a debt of intellectual gratitude, for he has made a substantial contribution to the ongoing revolution of Vichy historiography.

Notes

1. Letter published in *L'Événement du jeudi*, 5 Sept 1985, p. 63.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Henri Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris, 1987), pp. 325–26.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Most notably, Eberhard Jäckel's *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa* (Stuttgart, 1966); Marcel Ophuls's documentary film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1969); and Robert Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York, 1972).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Pascal Ory, *Les Collaborateurs* (Paris, 1976), p. 10.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Paul Jankowski, 'In Defense of Fiction: Resistance, Collaboration, and *Lacombe Lucien*', *Journal of Modern History*, 63.3 (1991), pp. 457–83; Richard Golsan, 'Collaboration and Context: Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* and the *Mode Rétro*' in Golsan, *Vichy's Afterlife: Memory and Counterhistory in Postwar France* (Lincoln, 2000), pp. 57–72.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France* (Oxford, 1986). Along the same lines, see ed. François Bédarida and Denis Peschanski, *Vichy, 1940–1944: archives de guerre d'Angelo Tasca* (Milan, 1986) and Sweets's article 'Hold that pendulum: redefining fascism, collaborationism, and resistance in France', *French Historical Studies*, 15.4 (1988), pp. 731–58.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. On this point Kitson echoes Laurent Douzou and Denis Peschanski, 'La Résistance française face à l'hypothèque Vichy', in ed. David Bidussa and Peschanski, *La France de Vichy: archives inédites d'Angelo Tasca* (Milan, 1996), pp. 3–42.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Pierre Laborie, *L'Opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris, 1990); Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida, eds., *Vichy et les Français* (Paris, 1992); Philippe Burrin, *La France à l'heure allemande* (Paris, 1993); Jacqueline Sainclivier and Christian Bougeard, eds., *La Résistance et les Français: enjeux stratégiques et environnement social* (Rennes, 1995); François Marcot, ed., *La Résistance et les Français: lutte armée et maquis* (Paris, 1996); Marc-Olivier Baruch, *Servir l'Etat Français* (Paris, 1997).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Brett Bowles, 'Newsreels, ideology, and public opinion under Vichy: the case of *La France en Marche*', *French Historical Studies*, 27.2 (2004), pp. 419–63'*La Tragédie de Mers-el-Kébir* and the politics of filmed news in France, 1940–1944', *Journal of Modern History*, 76.2 (2004), pp. 347–88'*German Newsreel Propaganda in France, 1940–1944*', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 24.1 (2004), pp. 45–67.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. See the excellent roundtable discussion posted at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables> [2] (H-Diplo, 2 June 2005). Included are reviews by Martin Thomas (Exeter University), Kim Munholland (University of Minnesota), Peter Jackson (University of Wales, Aberystwyth), Sean Kennedy (University of New Brunswick) and Douglas Porch (Naval Postgraduate School), as well as a lengthy response by Kitson.[Back to \(10\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and wishes to express his thanks to the reviewer for engaging so thoroughly with the themes of the book.

Other reviews:

[3]

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