

Resistance in Shades of Grey: The Complex Landscape of French Responses to Nazi Occupation and Vichy Regime, 1940–45¹

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Introduction

Though Vichy France was named after a town in the middle of France, this government gave up fighting against Nazi Germany and cooperated with them, providing numerous resources. However, during this period, inside the occupied zone and Vichy France, some organisations were still playing their part in fighting against their enemies. This article tries to answer the question: to what extent did the French population resist German occupation and Vichy Regime between 1940 and 1945, and how can we understand different levels of resistance and non-resistance?

This essay argues that although a relatively small minority of French people engaged in armed resistance, a broader group supported them in non-violent ways or resisted specific Nazi and Vichy policies (especially against Jews), while the majority remained passive or even collaborated. Using a five-level typology, it shows that resistance cannot be measured only by weapons, but also by moral choices and everyday actions.

Body

Part I Background Introduction

After being invaded on May 10th, 1940, by German bombers in the early morning, France surrendered on June 22nd, after about 40 days' resistance. Henri Philippe Pétain, together with Pierre Laval and some other leaders of France government established Vichy France based in Vichy, a town located in the middle of France.

Paxton argues that Vichy “took the initiative in collaboration” rather than simply submitting to German pressure. Vichy cooperated with the Nazi-Germany in many aspects. This turned France into a puppet of Nazi. From 1940–45, many Jews and foreigners were treated very badly by Vichy France government. Even in unoccupied area, French police rounded up 8,000–10,000 foreign Jews for deportation.² Jackson describes 1940–44 as the dark years in which most French people tried to adapt to occupation, while a minority chose

¹ About 2,700 words (not include the references and bibliography).

² Paxton, 2001, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, p.315.

resistance or collaboration.³

Part II Definitions and concepts

It's clear that those who took weapons and joined the resisting army should be regarded as resistant power. However, the people in the grey zone have a controversial role. Historians such as H. R. Kedward has stressed that most French people in 1940–44 cannot be simply classified as “heroes” or “traitors”.⁴ Many lived in a grey zone between resistance, accommodation, and collaboration. To analyse this complexity, this essay divides French responses into five levels.

Level I, those who took up guns and joined some resistance force secretly. They may not be trained so well as a soldier, but they do face German invaders directly and fight against them in a violent way. The leaders of these organisations and all the people who joined such organisation are all included in this level.

Level II, those who did not join any organisation and did not have fatal weapons. They might never kill a German soldier, but they were determined to free their country by expelling German invaders. They might be workers in the factory who produced weapons and other necessities to support the fighters. They also fought against German invaders through multiple methods, including ideological works.

Level III, those who were not quite sure about who should govern France, whether Vichy France or Germany, but they did feel angry with the brutal policies Nazi German advocated, including swiping away Jews and so on. This level might not have a very strong feeling about the French nation, but out of sympathy and sense of justice, they hated the invaders and wished to establish a better government which takes care of everybody, no matter Jews, foreigners or locals.

Level IV, those who did not care who was governing the country. They just wanted to live an ordinary life and survive in the world war (this wasn't easy for many people during that period). Some of them might help German invaders to satisfy their own interest. Though these people had no contribution to resistance, separating them into one level can help us better understand the scale of resistance.

Level V, collaborators. They sought collaboration initially and felt obliged to stand with the German invaders or listen to the Vichy Government. They included official organisations that were established by the Vichy Government and some individuals who follow the

³ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, (Oxford University Press)

⁴ H. R. Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France: A Study of Ideas and Motivation in the Southern Zone, 1940-1942*, (1978, Oxford University Press), p121.

guidelines by the Vichy authority.

Part III Details of the actions and scales of each level

Level I

In general, resistance forces were quite fragmented, and numerous organisations emerged and vanished in this period. It's impossible to include every organisation in this essay, so let us just focus on those most important ones.

In late 1940, in the unoccupied "Vichy" zone, Frenay began organising a small group of officers and civilians who opposed both Germany and Vichy's regime. Early on, his network used other names (such as *Mouvement de Libération Nationale*), but after merging with smaller groups in 1941, it took the name "Combat". It emerged at a time when open resistance was very risky and still quite rare. Combat in the south was among the first organised groups of non-Communist resistance.

There were two other organisations which are always mentioned together with Combat, and one of them is Libération-Sud. It was created by *Emmanuel d'Astier de La Vigerie* (1900–1969), a former naval officer and journalist with left-leaning, anti-fascist views. Julian Jackson describes Libération-Sud as one of the earliest organised resistance movements in the southern zone, alongside Combat and Franc-Tireur.⁵ Franc-Tireur was established in the unoccupied zone. The main founder was Jean-Pierre Lévy, a thirty-year-old Jewish commercial engineer from Alsace.

It is worth noting that the three organisations above have something in common. In the early stage of their foundation, they almost had no weapon or army. They all started as organisations that produced newspapers, discussed political issues and spread information. It was until 1942 that these groups carried out small teams who attacked isolated German soldiers or collaborators. Some of them also destroyed railways or factories controlled by Germany or Vichy collaborators. Part of the reason for not having army from the very beginning is that Vichy was controlling the deadly weapons strictly.

The *Francs-tireurs et partisans français*, or commonly the *Francs-tireurs et partisans* (FTP), was an armed resistance organisation created by leaders of the French Communist Party. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, French communists became very active. The FTP conducted over 1,000 attacks and sabotage operations in 1943 alone. However, their resistance had to do with the leadership from Moscow, and their real starting point of resistance began after German invaded the Soviet Union. The composition mainly included working classes and young people. They usually appeared as a small mobile group

⁵ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940–1944*, (Oxford University Press), p411.

containing 3 – 5 people and often used quick and surprise retreat, instead of organising huge battles. During the resistance, because they engaged very early and very actively in armed actions, Communist resisters suffered heavy losses: hundreds of them were arrested or departed and many of them were executed, and it was said that 75,000 people lost their lives. Some historians (e.g. François Furet⁶) argue that the PCF (*Parti Communiste Français*) exaggerated its exclusive role after the war for political reasons, but most agree that Communist resisters paid a very high price in human lives and were key in the armed struggle, especially in 1941–43.

The most widely known organisation is called Maquis and was even adapted into board games. While the earlier groups were primarily urban, the Maquis were rural bands located in the mountainous and forested regions of France, such as the Alps and the Massif Central. The movement saw explosive growth after February 1943, following the introduction of the Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO), which forced young French men to work in German factories. Thousands of young men fled to the countryside to avoid deportation, forming clandestine camps in the wild. Because they operated in remote areas, they could be supplied with weapons, with the help of Allied parachute drops. They destroyed bridges to slow down German troop movements and protected Allied airmen who had been shot down. However, because they were often poorly trained and lacked heavy weaponry, they also suffered brutal repression. A prominent example is the Battle of the Vercors in 1944, where a large Maquis uprising was crushed by German paratroopers, resulting in the deaths of over 600 resisters and many civilians.

Though the organisations are quite clear now, the number of participants remains controversial. Due to political reasons, parties and organisations tend to provide a number that is much higher than the accurate answer. Several decades after the incident, we can get closer to true number. In 2005, historian Olivier Wieviorka, in an article published in the journal *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, identified the following stark statistics regarding French losses during the period: "Throughout the period, the FFL-FFI recorded 78,000 deaths, in addition to 60,000 political deportees, 75,000 racial deportees, 30,000 executed by firing squad, and 60,000 victims of ground operations or massacres."⁷

It is also necessary to point out that the population joined in the resistance is changing. As the Allied gradually gained advantage in World War II, and especially after D-Day landing, the number of the resisters increased. It is estimated by Olivier Wieviorka that there

⁶ François Furet doubt that the slogan “party of 75,000 shot” is not statistical true and is far above the actual executed communist resisters. And he thinks the reason for overclaiming sacrifice is to help the party avoid critics on their political path, as the Communists use the logic: we sacrificed more, so we should not be criticized.

⁷ These numbers have been cited in many situations, but I failed to find the original essay from *Vingtième Siècle*. The number, however, includes the Free French Force, so it is not only about the organisations mentioned above.

were fewer than 10,000 active resisters in 1940 – 1941.⁸ And though in 1944, many people claimed that they had joined the resistance group, many of them took up guns right before the full victory,⁹ so that their resistance was more symbolic than having actual effect.

Level II

Combat Newspaper. While the organization 'Combat' falls into Level I, its newspaper is a prime example of Level II. This newspaper evolved from a small, mimeographed sheet in 1941 to tens of thousands of copies by 1943, which was very high for clandestine conditions. After liberation, *Combat* became a legal daily newspaper. The content of *Combat* is basically very aggressive and is criticizing the Vichy Authority sharply. It is calling for “keep fighting until fully liberation” in a paper published in 1943.

Libération. This newspaper matches Libération-Sud, and it was a bit similar to *Combat*. Historians usually date the first significant issue to mid-1941.¹⁰ Generally speaking, the content of the newspaper includes criticizing Vichy's collaboration, reporting Allied news and German defeat and arguing for a renewed France after liberation. Olivier Wieviorka underlines the importance of such newspapers in structuring resistance movements and giving them a common political language.

Apart from the famous underground newspaper, the intelligence network is also a crucial component of Level II. For example, railway workers knew the information that German military trains were coming and some of them reported the information to some resistance organisations. Also, people formed “escape lines” to help Allied soldiers escape from the occupied areas and the land being controlled by the Vichy Government. One famous line called “Comet Line” helped around 700 Allied airman escape through Sapin. During the process, thousands of French citizens risked their lives as guide, safe house providers, etc.

In addition to these networks, religious institutions also formed an important part of Level II support. Many Catholic clergy, together with monks, nuns used church buildings, schools and charities as shelters for resistance activities. They hid resisters, Allied airmen and Jews, provided them with food and clothes, and sometimes helped them obtain false identity papers and certificates so that they could pass German controls more easily. In cities like Lyon, Catholic organisations such as “*Amitié chrétienne*”¹¹ cooperated with Jewish aid groups to move children out of internment camps. At the same time, some priests and

⁸ Olivier Wieviorka, *The French Resistance*, translated by Jane Marie Todd, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 2016.

⁹ *Dictionnaire historique de la résistance*, (Paris: Laffont), p278.

¹⁰ Olivier Wieviorka, Jane Marie Todd, *The French Resistance*, (Belknap Press), 2016, p62.

¹¹ François Marcot, *Dictionnaire historique de la résistance*, (Paris : Laffont), pp.163-164.

religious intellectuals were involved in publishing clandestine Christian newspapers such as *Témoignage Chrétien*, which denounced Nazi racism and Vichy's persecution of Jews and encouraged Catholics to help the victims.

This level is much more difficult to calculate and be listed one by one, thus, may cause more chaos and debate. However, it is estimated that every single fighter with weapons needed about 5 to 10 people behind them to support them.

Level III

Vichy introduced its own anti-Jewish statutes in October 1940 and June 1941 and transferred more than 70,000 Jews to the concentration camp, with only about 2,000 survived. Yet around three-quarters of Jews in France escaped deportation. Jacques Sémelin argue that this relatively high survival rate (compared to other occupied countries) was largely due to the everyday help offered by non-Jewish French people—farmers, priests, teachers, neighbours—who provided false papers, hid children, or helped people move to safer zones. One well-known example is the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon¹², where many Jews hid for years. However, Level III resistance was selective.

Level IV

Level IV covers most of the population. These were people whose main aims were to survive in difficult circumstances: shortages, bombings, family separation, and fear of repression. They neither actively resisted nor actively collaborated.

However, passivity cannot automatically be equated with approval of Vichy or the occupiers. Many Level IV individuals silently hoped for an Allied victory and sometimes gave small, low-risk help to resisters, but they did not take steps that would put them or their families in grave danger. And this can explain why some people took up weapons after D-Day landing, as they feel encouraged by the Allied victory.¹³

Level V

Milice is a political paramilitary organization created on 30 January 1943, guided by Vichy France's Prime Minister Pierre Laval. They had a tight collaboration with the German troops and executed many resisters. It is said that the resisters cannot tell whether their enemies were Germans or *miliciens*.¹⁴

¹² Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II*, (Brandeis University Press), p411.

¹³ Though some people argue that these people wanted to gain their personal benefits or feared to be accused after the full victory, I still believe that D-Day Landing is, to some degree, encouraging people spiritually to fight back.

¹⁴ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*, (Harvard University Press), p.

Parti Populaire Français (French Popular Party, *PPF* in short) was a French fascist and anti-semitic political party led by Jacques Doriot before and during World War II. It is generally regarded as the most collaborationist party of France. Groups linked to the PPF by common membership mainly had unhumanitarian motives: in Lyon a *Mouvement national anti-terroriste* was established to combat the Resistance by fighting "terror with terror"; other PPF members joined the *Gardes Françaises* set up by German police authorities as a counterweight to the Milice. The PPF was also financially supported by employers and French businessmen which sought to encourage a popular nationalist anti-Communist force and experienced rapid growth in its membership.¹⁵

Another organisation called Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism (*Légion des volontaires français*, LVF) was a unit of German Army, consisting of volunteers from France, created in July 1941. They were not under Vichy's control but was led directly by Germany. There were 5,800 troops in total.¹⁶ They did not only fight in France territory but also fought against Russian. Though the volunteers were French, they were given German uniforms. The people in this army were mostly in low social status, some may have criminal records, while some others suffered unemployment. They forced about a thousand French youth to do labour work in Germany.¹⁷

Part IV Summary and conclusion

The scale of resistance is hard to be estimated very accurately, but we can find that the resistant forces overcame lots of difficulties and tried their best to fight back in their own way. Though it might still be quite sensitive after eighty years, we must admit that for most French people at that time, did not choose to fight in an active way, while even more people joined collaborative organisations. The choice of collaborating or resisting is also greatly influenced by the class a person belongs to and the political party one belongs to. For the majority, they stand away from politics or simply follow authority.

In conclusion, the resistance while limited in absolute numbers, had an influence to the war's outcome and saved many people's lives, and shaped France's post-war identity. In a society where collaboration was an easier and safer choice, those who resisted demonstrated remarkable courage that transcended mere statistics.

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¹⁵ Payne, Stanley G. *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945*. (University of Wisconsin Press), pp. 297–298.

¹⁶ Beyda, Oleg. *Joining Hitler's Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 288–316.

¹⁷ Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation*, (Allen Lane), 2006.

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