On 21 June 1941, Irène Nèmîrovsky, a Jewish author who fled her native Russia for Paris in 1920, dejectedly wrote in her notebook, “France is going to join hands with Germany.”¹¹ Fearing to draw too much attention to her Jewish background, Nèmîrovsky was a quiet mourner of the Franco-German Armistice who put her energy into writing a book about the French experience during the war years.

Article III of the Franco-German Armistice declared, “All French authorities and officials of the occupied territory are to be promptly informed by the French Government to comply with the regulations of the German military commanders and to cooperate with them in a correct manner.”¹² This article simply required French authorities to cooperate with the Germans. Some French actually cooperated with the German occupation more than was required by the articles of the Armistice while others resisted the Nazis by taking part in public demonstrations and even acts of violence. A majority of the French population, like Nèmîrovsky, simply tried to survive the difficult times.

France has a long history of revolution and counterrevolution. Perry Biddiscombe writes, “every French war of the modern period has borne elements of civil war.”³ For France, the Second World War was merely a precursor to a divisive internal struggle. The signing of the Armistice ended the conflict between the French and German states in June 1940. However, an even more devastating Franco-French conflict emerged out of the Occupation and threatened the stability of post-war France.

Robert Brasillach, the editor of the collaborationist newspaper Je Suis Partout described the years of Nazi Occupation in France: “During these years the French have all more or less been to bed with Germany.”¹⁴ Brasillach suggests that all French citizens collaborated with the German occupiers in some way. However, Stanley Hoffman distinguished between collaboration with Germany and collaboration with the Nazis. The former, cooperation with the victorious power for reasons of state and business, was practiced most by the petit bourgeois who relied on “business as usual”⁶ and served German customers, though often grudgingly.

The French, however, had more than simply a business-like relationship with their occupiers. By late 1943, Germans had fathered around 85,000 illegitimate children in France. Alistair Horne writes that the loss of two million French men – prisoners of war or serving as slave labor – may have caused many French women to turn to the young, attractive, and polite German men who occupied their cities. “But, most of all,” Horne continues, “as the war dragged on and life became harsher and harsher in Paris, sleeping with a German often became the only way a woman could keep her children from starvation.”¹⁷ Some French women were driven to prostitution as a result of financial need. However, in many cases, German soldiers simply provided for their French lovers.⁸ For much of the French population, collaboration with their German occupiers was a mechanism of survival.

Collaboration with Nazism, however, was an open cooperation with and support of the policies of the Nazi regime. These included people like the anti-Semitic Brasillach, who briefly served in the French military and was a prisoner of war until he was released to take over the editorship of Je Suis Partout. In 1945, he was executed for his role as a collaborationist.¹⁰ The Occupation saw the rise of numerous newspapers. Les Nouveaux Temps supported the Nazi ideology and was funded by Pierre Laval, Phillipe Pétain’s vice premier and chief aid, and Otto Abetz, the German ambassador to the Vichy regime. Marcel Déat founded the paper L’Œuvre as well as the Reassemblement Nationale Populaire (RNP), a fascist collaborationist party.

These journalists cooperated with the German occupiers for various reasons. Déat had opposed France’s entry into the war, and anti-Semites and anti-communists were attracted to the Nazi creed. However, according to Stanley Hoffman, French collaborators were largely “social misfits and political deviants… Without the Nazis, their chance of gaining power in France was nil, and in Germany the Nazi party and regime had made use of and given a sense of mission to comparable misfits.”¹¹¹ For many journalists, collaboration with Nazism provided them with greater opportunities than were offered by the Third Republic.¹² Some French were sincerely attracted to the spirit and firmness of the Germans, compared to the Third Republic’s “supposed passivity and lack of dynamism, most starkly reflected in the easy defeat of 1940.”¹¹³ Disillusioned with their own government, they sought guidance from another.

To an extent, French intellectuals, such as writers and publishers, also collaborated with the Germans. Publishers agreed to suppress literary works by Jews and dissidents, and, as a result, Otto Abetz limited German interference with the publishing industry.¹⁴ Authors submitted their works for approval by the censors in order to continue writing and maintain their literary survival. Both writers and publishers collaborated with the German authorities and, as a result, France published an average of 6,400 books each year of the war, more than any other country in the world.¹⁵ Not all intellectuals, however, agreed to censorship, and around 8,000 authors were banned.¹⁶ This illustrates that some French people chose to resist their occupiers. The French Resistance was composed mostly of urban, upper and middle class French men and women.¹⁷ In 1941, Hitler’s invasion of Russia turned a former supporter, the French Communist Party, against Germany, adding a powerful dimension to the Resistance. Despite these supporters, Horne writes that the Resistance was only “a small minority,”¹¹⁸ a fact that would prove divisive following the Liberation.

Resistance to the Nazis was more difficult in Paris than in the French suburbs, as systems of communication were
under constant surveillance and escape was nearly impossible. Resistors also lived in fear of délation, or denouncement by neighbors. Despite these obstacles, however, Paris was the center for most resistance movements in France. The first significant, though unsuccessful, expression of opposition to the Germans was a demonstration by a group of Parisian students following the arrest of a popular professor of the Sorbonne. On Armistice Day 1940, the students marched down the Champs-Élysées to the Etoile, singing the Marseillaise and chanting the name of General Charles de Gaulle. The Nazis arrested 123 of the demonstrators. The first réseau, or Resistance network, was hardly more effective. Formed by a group of ethnologists, it managed to produce an underground newspaper, called Résistance, before many of the members were denounced to the German authorities. By 1942, eight of the ethnologists had been executed and eleven deported. The Franco-German Alliance forbade French citizens to fight against their occupiers. According to the Armistice, “French citizens who violate this provision are to be treated by German troops as insurgents,” and in the early years of the Occupation, most Resistance groups opposed violence. They performed pranks to humiliate the Germans and raise French morale. In the later years of the Occupation, however, the number of people joining the Resistance increased as a result of the ever growing possibility of an Allied invasion. Resistors often resorted to violence in order to achieve their desired ends. In 1944, in the small town of Ascq, local saboteurs destroyed the railway line going from Brussels to Lille. Even these violent acts of aggression, however, proved largely ineffective. A German military train was stopped by the explosion but no military personnel were injured. Despite there being no German casualties, reprisal on the town was immediate and destructive, resulting in the deaths of 86 French citizens. The quick reprisal was in accordance with new instructions, authorized by Hitler in 1941. These stated “If troops are attacked in any manner…there is to be an immediate return of fire. If innocent persons are hit this is regrettable, but entirely the fault of the terrorists.” These instructions were to prevent German troops from being exposed to further attack by resistance fighters. By the end of the Occupation, the Germans had executed 11,000 French resisters and another 5,000 had been deported to concentration camps. Members of the Resistance chose to endanger their own lives and the lives of other members of their community. This risk was not taken for a single set of ideological or political views, which varied between individuals. In fact, there was some conflict within the resistance – particularly towards the end of the war and between communists and Gauillists – about how the government would be run after the war was over. However, all parties agreed that reform was impossible as long as the Nazis were undefeated. The population was generally receptive to the Resistance, making widespread demonstrations possible. In 1942, Resistance newspapers urged the people to wear the national colors on Bastille Day, and the response was sixty-six demonstrations throughout France, though most were in the Southern Zone. The response of the French community, however, was not always positive. As demonstrated by the events in Ascq, an individual act of resistance had a profound impact on the community as a whole. The German occupiers viewed acts of resistance as a form of terrorism, and considered the whole community responsible for “terrorist acts committed within them.” Robert Gildea writes that the French population responded to the Resistance in different ways: by creating a “cult of the heroes,” by directing their anger toward the Germans, or with resentment toward the resisters themselves. The initial response of the Ascq community was hatred toward the Germans. However, there was also tension within the community, for the 86 dead fell into two groups: the fusillés and the massacres. The fusillés were the saboteurs, responsible for the destruction of the railway line, and shot by the Germans, and the massacres were the innocent members of the community who were massacred as a result of the sabotage. In 1994, on the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre, Robert Gildea interviewed an Ascq resident: “On the question of forgiveness she said that there were not one but two groups of people who had to be forgiven: the Germans of course, but also ‘those who set off the explosion so close to a town’.” The most detrimental effect the Occupation had on France, however, was not the destruction of French villages and lives by the Germans. It was the civil strife that the Occupation and, more specifically, the collaboration of French citizens caused. In June 1941, Némirovsky wrote, “I cannot forgive certain individuals, those who reject me, those who coldly abandon us, those who are prepared to stab you in the back. Those people…if I could just get my hands on them.” Némirovsky did not get her revenge. The following July, she was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where she died. As the war dragged on and conditions became harsher, especially in Paris, resentment of collaborationists grew and, by 1943, reprisals by resistance fighters were increasing. Reprisals were most extensive in Paris, where collaborationism was most visible. General Charles de Gaulle recognized that occupation and collaboration had divided France. However, he maintained that the State, not individuals, should judge and punish collaborators. In a 1944 broadcast de Gaulle said, “It is true that many made mistakes at one moment or the other, since this thirty years' war broke out in 1914...Let us try to forget! France is made up of all Frenchmen. Unless she is to perish, she needs the hearts, the spirits and the strength of all her sons and daughters.”

Much of the punishment that took place, however, was not government sanctioned, and this came to be known as the épuration sauvage, or wild purge. Julian Jackson writes that there were three distinct phases of the epuration. The first, which resulted in about 2,400 deaths, transpired before France was actually liberated in June 1944. These deaths Jackson considers to have occurred during the Occupation, as a result of Resistance violence. Another 5,000 deaths occurred during fighting between D-Day and the actual Liberation: “These were acts of war rather than examples of ‘people's justice’.” According to Jackson, the actual épuration sauvage took place between the Liberation and the establishment of
The motives behind the violent épuration – both government sanctioned and savage – were as many and various as the reasons behind collaboration and resistance. For some it was a necessary catharsis following the humiliation of the Occupation. For others it was “vengeance mixed with justice.”

Just as the Resistance knew that reform in France was impossible as long as the Nazis remained, advocates of the épuration believed that, in order to make way for the creation of a new France, it was necessary to eliminate those who had seemingly betrayed the old France. More than anything, the épuration reveals the complexity of Franco-French relations.

In 1942, Irène Némirovsky wrote an entry in her notebook that expressed this complexity and seemed to foreshadow the events that she would not live to see: “The French grew tired of the Republic as if she were an old wife. For them, the dictatorship was a brief affair, adultery. But they intended to cheat on their wife, not to kill her. Now they realize she’s dead, their Republic, their freedom. They’re mourning her.”

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