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The Nazi triumph over France in June 1940 stunned the French nation. Even so, it was not long before courageous and resilient Frenchmen began to resist the German occupation. One of the earliest resistance groups was formed by staff members of the Musée de l'Homme, under the leadership of Boris Vildé. In December 1940 this group commenced publishing Résistance, an underground newspaper. Although the group was liquidated in the next few months, it showed that civilization and decency were not dead and it portended an even greater effort by Frenchmen in the difficult years to come.

THE EARLY FRENCH RESISTANCE IN PARIS

by

Martin Blumenson

In 1940 the resistance emerged in occupied France to challenge by nonviolent means the awesome power of the German occupation. The basic conflict was over values, and the proponents of each set were easily identified. On the one hand were German soldiers and administrators who represented a victorious army, a triumphant government, and a way of life called nazism, which stressed discipline, order, and authority, stifled scholarship and free inquiry, classified human beings as "aryan" supermen or inferior subhumans on the basis of race and ethnicity, and had no hesitation to use force and brutality.

On the other were the victims, the conquered, shocked, stunned, and humiliated who wished to adjust and to accommodate to the new German order, to be sane in the face of reality, yet they were torn by their adherence to the traditional values of Western civilization, liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy, representative government, and free debate.

Particularly in retrospect, the line between morality and immorality, between good and bad, between the crass and the spiritual appears to be clear and distinct.

The collapse of the French Army, indeed of virtually the entire society, in the 6 weeks following Hitler's attack on 10 May, disillusioned and shocked the population. Premier Paul Reynaud, who wished to continue the war from North

*This paper is based on and taken from my book *The Vildé Affair: Beginnings of the French Resistance*, to be published by Houghton Mifflin in July 1977. © by Martin Blumenson.

Africa, had no support from his government and was replaced by Marshal Philippe Pétain, World War I hero, the victor at Verdun, a legendary figure to most Frenchmen. Pétain immediately asked the Germans the terms they required for an armistice.

On the following day, 18 June 1940, General Charles de Gaulle spoke to the French people over the radio from London. Emphasizing that the contest was a world war and that ultimate victory was possible, he invited all French officers and enlisted men to join him in England. "Whatever happens," he said, "the flame of the French resistance must not die and will not die."

Not many Frenchmen heard de Gaulle's appeal. Very few read accounts of his message in several papers in Marseille and Lyon on the following day. A few weeks later everyone in France knew something about it.

What he had said was vaguely understood. He seemed to want to rebuild the French Armed Forces in England for further military action against the Germans. He neither anticipated nor created what was to become the underground movement. His use of the word "resistance" was in a conventional military context. Yet his talk provided hope for those who were unsympathetic with the desire for an armistice.

Delegates of the Pétain government signed the terms of capitulation with Germany and Italy, and an armistice went into effect on 25 June. Half a million French soldiers were in prisoner-of-war camps; 120,000 had been killed; 250,000 were wounded.

De Gaulle spoke again on the radio and talked of the flame of the French resistance "shining and burning," but no one knew what he meant.

The armistice imposed a line of demarcation that cut France into two parts. In the north, including Paris, was the occupied zone; in the south the unoccupied zone, with Pétain's government at Vichy. Traveling across the line, guarded by German troops, from one zone to the other was prohibited without a special German pass called an *ausweis.*

German forces had entered Paris on 14 June, and within a short time the city had changed. German troops were everywhere. German flags, large red standards with the swastika, flew from important buildings and principal hotels. Messages on the radio advised that the Jews, Englishmen, Freemasons, politicians, and plutocrats were responsible for the war, the defeat, and whatever ills the French suffered.

German headquarters and agencies were established all over town, many with overlapping and conflicting functions and confused jurisdictions that made it difficult to know who was responsible for what. They regulated currency and prices, controlled electricity, started to repair roads and bridges, and issued directives. One German bureau immediately decreed that the French flag was not to be displayed at funerals and at Boy Scout ceremonies. Another prohibited the *Marseillaise,* the national anthem, to be sung in public.

The police directed traffic in the German manner. A profusion of German language signs pointed the way at important intersections to German offices. French newspapers with German permission and censorship appeared in print. Large posters, written in German in one column and in French in the other, adorned walls and buildings, proclaiming, warning, and ordering.

One said, "Military Government will take all necessary measures to safeguard troops and maintain calm. The orders from the military authorities must be obeyed without reservation. Avoid all impulsive and thoughtless acts. Every act of sabotage, active or passive, will be severely punished."

Every day the Germans staged a parade. A company of soldiers and a

band directed by a huge drum major goosestepped up the Champs Elysées to the Arch of Triumph, then returned.

The first sign of opposition came during these parades. Some Parisians looked away, stared into the shop windows, turned their backs to the street, trying to shut out the music, making no reference to the event.

For the most part, everyone in France, as an historian has said, was stupefied by the military disaster, traumatized by the exodus, conditioned by a propaganda already well orchestrated. They had welcomed Pétain as a savior and the armistice as deliverance, and they saw the defeat as merited punishment. As many saw it to wish to continue the struggle, to persist in solidarity with Great Britain, to take even General de Gaulle seriously, to think of organizing for clandestine action was to cede to impulse, to act unreasonably and to withdraw from the national collectivity.

Yet individuals and small groups emerged spontaneously from the stunned population and found ways to oppose the newly established order. In the last few days of June 1940, arrangements were already being explored on how to get military information to the British Intelligence Service by way of Switzerland and Spain. Other activity was starting, unorganized at first, gradually coalescing.

For example, one dear old lady, from the early days of July 1940, was engaged in the fabrication of false papers of all sorts. Becoming involved by chance, she was turning out identity cards, demobilization certificates, and ration tickets by the hundreds.

Her name became known to others in these activities, and a retired colonel, looking for a place to work in private, came to her. She found him a small room that no one was using where she worked, entered his name in the ledger as an inspector-general, and obtained a building pass for him. He copied German military plans, listed new airfield construction, and recorded the locations of troops and installations.

She carried documents from the colonel to persons she did not know, and she brought the colonel messages from those contacts.

Eventually she was arrested, put in jail, but was quickly released by a judge who had a doctor certify that she was mentally disturbed and incompetent and not responsible for her acts.

If some people specialized in false papers, others concentrated on helping men escape from prisoner-of-war camps, provisional and rather primitive facilities with haphazard and poor food, virtually no medical service, and nothing for the men to do. The prisoners awaited their release after the armistice. Instead, they learned, they were to be shipped to Germany as a labor force to work in factories and on farms.

The wish to escape was overpowering, but civilian clothes and false papers, as well as guides for the British soldiers who spoke no French, were needed. Although German regulations prescribed severe punishment for civilians having unauthorized contact with prisoners of war, methods of escape came into being quickly.

Until the prisoners were moved to Germany in October 1940, thousands were helped to escape. They were started along secret routes to Spain where they could get to England.

If some people drifted into the work that as yet had no name, others were driven to it by what the Germans did. There was no dramatic event, no symbolic incident, but instead a series of minor irritations that gradually rubbed the French the wrong way.

The Germans created the friction thoughtlessly. Their actions flowed in part out of their defeat in World War I and their memory of the humiliating Versailles peace treaty; in part out of their urge to remake the world, specifically France and especially Paris, into

their image. Their superman mentality, egoism, lack of sensitivity, and an insane or foolish stupidity drove them.

For example, on the day after the armistice went into effect, a crew of German soldiers armed with pickaxes and shovels, hammers and crowbars, demolished the statue of Gen. Charles Mangin, a World War I hero. A week later they destroyed the monument to Edith Cavell. In Vincennes they destroyed the memorial to the dead of 1914-1918 because they thought the inscription was insulting.

At the debris of the pedestal where Mangin's statue had stood, two courtly elderly gentlemen met by chance. They had come spearately to see what the Germans had done. They were retired colonels, and as they chatted mildly, they concluded that something had to be done about the German occupation. This meeting led to the formation of an anti-Nazi group directed by the two colonels who specialized in the collection and transmission of military intelligence.

Irritating actions by the Germans were paralleled by peculiar actions on the part of Marshal Pétain's government, which was setting out to collaborate with the new German order. Following German guidance, the Pétain government soon adopted the Nazi racial laws, acquiesced in the propaganda, and became, in the eyes of many Frenchmen, a puppet regime. "Was this France?" many asked.

Bastille Day, 14 July, the national holiday, fell on a Sunday in 1940, and it was a pleasantly warm day. Thousands of Parisians turned out and placed flowers around the flame of the Unknown Soldier at the Arch of Triumph. An innocent gesture or an expression of patriotism equated with opposition to the Germans? It was barely 3 weeks after the armistice, but the Germans began to be uneasy.

They held press conferences twice a week in Paris for French reporters, briefing them on what the German papers were featuring, what themes were acceptable. German newsreels and cultural films were shown in Paris theaters. All seemed to be propaganda, and gradually skepticism over the news being published spread. Purchasers of newspapers began to tell vendors at the Kiosks, "Let me have a copy of the *Daily Liar.*"

In July, August, and September 1940, small groups of friends were complaining about the occupation, and some of them became organized and linked one to the other in an attempt to do something. Many produced and disseminated flyers and tracts. Handwritten, typed, mineographed, they were distributed secretly, hastily stuffed into mailboxes, casually left in half-darkened subway cars, nonchalantly deposited on park benches, surreptitiously slipped into merchandise for sale in department stores.

They gave news from the BBC radio programs and from stories in foreign newspapers made available by friends in embassies. They appealed for dignity and commonsense, for suspicion of information coming from German sources. Extracts from speeches by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill were popular.

A subject that became famous concerned the disparaging remarks that President Poincaré and Marshal Joffre had made about Pétain in the First World War. They had characterized him as a vain and obstinate old man with limited military perceptions who was thoroughly defeatist in outlook, ready throughout much of the 1914-1918 struggle to make peace on unfavorable terms. Those who read the tract smiled and said, "Imagine, Pétain, even then." Another version had it that Pétain had believed firmly in the defeat of France in 1918. Twenty-two years later he was able to say, "You see, I was right."

Some youngsters on bicycles attached stickers to the backs of

German trucks, stickers that said, "We are for General de Gaulle." Napoleon's statement was repeated: "To live in defeat is to die every day." Foch's line was reiterated: "A people is conquered only when it accepts defeat." Clemenceau had remarked, "In war as in peace, the last word is to those who never surrender."

General de Gaulle and his organization, the Free French in London, made skillful use of the BBC. Eventually 12 programs were beamed every day to France, cultural programs, French music, and the like. They also stimulated a sense of orderly opposition, peaceful manifestations of one sort or another as protest against the occupation.

For example, they suggested that veterans and everybody else who wanted to do so walk out on Armistice Day, 11 November, to stroll through Paris, to place flowers at the statue of Clemenceau, the Tiger in World War I who had led the French to victory. A large turnout showed a sense of solidarity and discreet opposition. Later, de Gaulle's organization asked French people to stay home on the afternoon of New Year's Day, 1941, so that those on the streets would mark themselves as collaborators of the occupation.

This was tremendously successful in mobilizing people who could not, for one reason or another—health, temperament, circumstances, or whatever—take an active role against the occupation. They felt themselves mobilized too, participating members in a giant underground scarcely seen that was dedicated to removing the German presence from France.

The deteriorating standard of living also generated French hatred of the Germans. After 23 September, ration cards were needed to buy ever-decreasing stocks of bread and meat, and later, cards would be needed for most foods, for clothing, fuel, and more. Unemployment and galloping inflation, regulated prices and currency had their effects, along with requisitions and expropriations. Although the Germans blamed the British blockade for the difficulties of staying alive, the huge daily reparation that France paid Germany, together with the systematic economic looting, was responsible.

A certain climax was reached on 24 December 1940, the day before Christmas. When Parisians got up and went out to work or to shop, they saw new German posters all over town, put up during the night. The announcement was short. It read, "The engineer Jacques Bonsergent of Paris was condemned to death by a German military tribunal for an act of violence against a member of the German army. He was shot and executed this morning. Dated: December 23. Signed: The Military Commander in France."

No one knew who Jacques Bonsergent was or why he was killed. But many people in Paris at midnight mass, celebrated by order of the German authorities at 5 p.m., prayed for his soul. He shocked Parisians into a clearer awareness of the occupation, for it seemed to many Frenchmen that the Germans, without compassion, without even concern, killed to maintain their concept of order.

By then, a considerable resistance organization was inbeing. If some persons had drifted into the secret work that had as yet no name, if others were driven to it by what the Germans did, a substantial group of men and women had made a conscious choice after due deliberation.

They were for the most part intellectuals. Professors, anthropologists, art historians, linguistics specialists, they understood better than anyone else the meaning of nazism, its racism, brutality, mockery of culture and civilization. They were the first to form groups of like-minded friends and acquaintances to combat what they saw was otherwise inevitable, the transformation of

egalitarian and parliamentarian France into an image of Nazi Germany.

One of the earliest resistance groups was formed by staff members of the Musée de l'Homme, the Museum of Man, which still stands on place du Trocadéro opposite the Eiffel Tower and overlooks the Seine River. The group they formed was known by the name of the museum even though they rather quickly established links to other groups and welded cooperating cells into networks.

The leader of this group was a man of 32 named Boris Vildé. Vildé and his associates helped prisoners of war to escape from the camps, put out flyers and tracts, and gathered and transmitted military information to the British. Significantly, Vildé's group procured, copied, and forwarded plans of the naval base at St. Nazaire that the Germans were using for surface raiders and submarines. These plans helped the British launch the amphibious operation against St. Nazaire in March 1942, an operation called "the greatest raid of all" that virtually destroyed the port and the U-boat base.

By October 1940, Vildé was thinking of bigger things. He wished to federate all the resistance groups in occupied France so that they would be responsive to a single direction. If all the energy of the small and separate and independent groups could be harnessed to expand the membership and to carry out harassing actions, the Germans might be driven from France.

But how could he, in a country full of German agents and spies and counterespionage police and military units, to say nothing of active collaborators who welcomed the Germans, exert his control over so large a number of dispersed and hidden people? His solution was to found a clandestine newspaper. Through it he would give hope and direction to the movement, inspire the timid and bewildered, and establish a method of action that thousands of followers would carry out in a massive internal movement of such might as to confront the occupation.

The first issue appeared on 15 December 1940, and it consisted of four mimeographed pages. A host of volunteers carried copies to the far corners of France, where they were copied and recopied. Some found their way to London, while others were picked up by the Germans.

The title of the newspaper was *Résistance*, and this was the first time that the anti-German activities received the name that would be applied ever since—resistance. The editorial read in part as follows:

> Resist! This is the cry that comes from the hearts of all of you who suffer from our country's disaster. This is the wish of all of you who want to do your duty. But you feel isolated and disarmed. In the chaos of ideas, opinions, and systems, you are confused and looking for your duty. "Resistance" is here to speak to your hearts and brains, to show you what to do.
>
> Resistance means above all to act, to be positive, to perform reasonable and useful things. Many of you who have tried are discouraged because you think you are powerless. But some have formed themselves into groups, scattered and weak. Patiently, we have searched them out. We have united them. They are numerous (more than an army in Paris alone). They are ardent and resolute men and women who understand that organization is necessary, that a method, a discipline, and leaders are needed.
>
> The method? Group yourselves in your homes with those whom you know. Choose your leaders. They will find other groups with which to work in common. Our committee will coordinate your

efforts with friends in unoccupied France and with those who are fighting alongside our allies. Your immediate task is to organize yourselves so that you can, when you receive the order, take up the fight again. Find resolute men and enroll them with care. Bring comfort and decision to those who doubt or who no longer dare hope. Seek out and watch those who have renounced our country and betray it. Meet together every day and transmit information useful to your leaders. Practice an inflexible discipline, a constant prudence, an absolute discretion. Beware of inconsequential people, of talkers, and of traitors. Never boast, never give yourselves away. Face up to the moment. Later we shall tell you how to act.

In accepting our responsibilities as your leaders, we have promised to sacrifice everything, staunchly and pitilessly, for this mission. Unknown among ourselves yesterday, having never participated in the quarrels of the prewar political parties, we are Frenchmen. We have only one ambition, one passion, one wish: to bring about the rebirth of a pure and free France.

It was that editorial that defined the resistance. Those who were members belonged to organized groups that had recognized leaders and performed specific functions. This too has become the classic definition of resistance activity.

The second issue of "Resistance" appeared on 30 December 1940. It had six pages. The editorial read in part: "All of you who have agreed to work in this community of resistance for the liberation of our country, you must remember this essential idea, that we cannot act effectively without an organization founded on discipline." What was discipline? A thoughtful and reasoned obedience to leaders. Flaming words, hasty gestures, absurd bravados, or moving sacrifices could hardly save the country. What was needed was an immense work, daily, patient, secret, and of savage tenacity. The first task was to organize a network of disciplined legions within the France that was in chains, the occupied zone.

The third issue appeared on 31 January 1941. The editorial counseled readers to stop thinking of France as a conquered nation. France was a symbol of science and art, civilization and humanism, culture and liberty. "No, France is not vanquished if we remain proud of her, resolute in our resistance to save her, if we seek in her past only reasons to make her more beautiful, more free, more generous, more human."

The fourth number appeared on 1 March. It was obviously prepared in haste. The editorial lacked the finish of previous exhortations. Yet the message was strong and persuasive. "We must say it and repeat it without stop to ourselves: resistance of the oppressed French people is becoming increasingly powerful in the world struggle for liberation." Germany needed France. No longer sure of victory, Germany required a France that was ready to serve, ready to consent to the betrayal perpetrated by Vichy. The real France was in resistance, and this was the new France being created, a nation unwilling to accept the occupation. By resisting the invaders, France, was becoming once again truly French.

The fifth number dated 25 March was the last. It had two pages and little content.

The reason why the newspaper languished and finally died is the dwindling number of editors, contributors, and distributors. Since January 1941, the Germans had been arresting members of Vildé's group. Those who escaped traveled to the south of France, to the unoccupied zone.

Tracking resistance people, the Germans picked up and imprisoned about 25 members of the group known as the Musée de l'Homme. The arrests took place during the first 4 months of 1941, and Vildé's group was liquidated.

In their short resistance life, these members helped to bring France from the stupor of the defeat, the disillusionment of the German conquest, and the paralysis of the national will to a reawakening of morality and dignity and hope.

The first resistance reaction had come from those who understood nazism and who opposed collusion and concessions. The individual and spontaneous resistance from the beginning was a refusal to accept the reality of the German military victory in 1940 and the German domination of Europe. They were clearheaded on how the Germans were corrupting the world, and they understood that the peaceful presence of the Germans in France was a pretense, the government at Vichy a sham.

The resistance was born after the armistice when France was cut in two, when the Germans controlled the north, when Vichy tried to persuade the world that France remained independent. In part the Germans stimulated the resistance—by their massive purchases of food and other items for shipment to Germany, by their patronizing attitude toward the French, by their goosestep military parades, their gross propaganda, their announcements on the walls of Paris, and by their crimes against the dignity of human life. Rooted in the memories of the Franco-Prussian War and the siege of Paris, in the recollections of the First World War, the resistance fed on the long lines at the stores, the flourishing black market, the lack of heat, the declining quality of life.

It took three forms initially: escapes, which required safe houses, conductors, and passers across the demarcation line; information networks, which collected and transmitted military intelligence; and tracts and newspapers to clarify the meaning of the occupation and the role of Vichy.

The Musée de l'Homme group was among the first, perhaps the very first, to carry out the original resistance. But what gave Vildé's movement its unique place were two accomplishments, his use of the word "resistance" that crystallized the vague and amorphous activities into a single, well-recognized endeavor; and his vision of federation, his desire to unify for concerted effort all the spontaneous bands arising throughout the country, a task finally accomplished in 1943 by Jean Moulin.

With a network of persons unskilled in the game of secret existence, Boris Vildé and his friends drove the Germans to distraction, to discomfort, to uneasiness, to bewilderment, and finally to bloody repression on a massive scale. For the resistance threatened to make the occupation too costly to the Germans.

If Vildé's activists were a comparative handful, they could be effective only because the great majority of their countrymen were their accomplices. A movement like the Musée de l'Homme, with tentacles across France, depended on a substantial number of passive people who were mobilized too and gave a helping hand. In Mao Tse-tung's figure, the fish could swim if the water nourished and kept them alive.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Martin Blumenson is a noted military historian. He has served on the faculties of the U.S. Army War College, The Citadel and the Naval War College. He is author of *The Patton Papers*, as well as several works on World War II. Currently he is doing historical research for the U.S. Air Force.

Could the resistance have forced the Germans out of France without the military invasion of the European continent in June 1944? Would the internal conflict have exacerbated to the point where the Germans would find themselves unable to keep an entire population repressed and submissive by the massive use of the bayonet? How many German reprisals, executions, deportations were necessary to keep the resistance in check? How many German troops were needed to keep the dissidence at a low level, below overt disturbance, riot, and mass uprising?

There are, of course, no firm answers. But what is admirable is that men and women risked and sometimes lost their lives to restore human values in a world of brute force.