

**The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation,
and Memory**
UCB-OLLI
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Introduction

Collaboration, Resistance, Survival: The Germans in France During World War II - Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

Shortly before being executed for having collaborated with Nazi Germany during the German occupation of France in the Second World War, the French writer Robert Brasillach wrote that "Frenchmen given to reflection, during these years, will have more or less slept with Germany—not without quarrels—and the memory of it will remain sweet for them." Brasillach's statement shines a light on a highly charged and complex period: the four-year occupation of France by Nazi Germany from 1940 through 1944. In the years since the war, the French have continued to discuss and debate the experiences of those who lived through the war and their meanings for identity and memory in France. On 25 August 2019, a new museum, actually a transfer and extension of a previously existing museum in Paris, was opened to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the French capital.



Above: German Servicewomen in Occupied Paris

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

Our course examines the Occupation in six two-hour meetings. Each class session will have a theme, subdivided into two halves with a ten-minute break in between.

Class Schedule:

1. From Victory to Defeat: France emerges victorious after the First World War but fails to maintain its supremacy.

1-A. The Interwar Years: We focus on France's path from victory in the First World War through their failure to successfully resist the rise of Nazi Germany during the interwar years and their overwhelming defeat in the Second. The French emerged victorious from World War I in 1918 but they failed to gain a peace they could maintain. Germany was weakened but only temporarily and was not prevented from renewed war some twenty years later. Marshal Ferdinand Foch, head of the French military at the end of World War I recognized this as early as in 1919 when he stated: "This is not a peace. It is an armistice for twenty years." With most of its military leaders anticipating that another war with Germany would be a defensive struggle as had been the First World War, the French invested huge sums in the Maginot Line, a series of fortresses along the French border with Germany that was expected to block any armed German advance into France. The Maginot Line, however, was never fully completed. It extended only to the Franco-Belgian border, ultimately leaving the French dependent on a Belgian defense against the Germans in the event of war. France's isolation became clear at the Munich Conference in September 1938, when they could not stop Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain from yielding the Sudetenland, then part of Czechoslovakia, to Germany as part of his policy of "appeasing" Hitler in the hopes of avoiding war.

1-B. 1940 Defeat: Appeasement failed to satisfy the Germans who attacked Poland in September 1939, launching what would become the Second World War in Europe. The French decided to fight a defensive war behind their Maginot Line. By October 1939, as the Germans routed the Poles, the war in the west had settled into what became known as the "phony war" or "*drôle de guerre*," with little movement through the winter of 1939-1940. In May 1940, however, the Germans successfully invaded

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands causing some eight to ten million civilians to flee south in a population movement that came to be known as "*L'Exode*" [the Exodus]. To escape the Germans, the French government also fled south. Marshal Philippe Pétain, a hero of the First World War, was named Premier and he immediately called for an armistice with the victorious Germans. General Charles de Gaulle, speaking on the radio from London, countered with a call for the French to continue fighting and became the leader of what ultimately became known as "Free France." Pétain's call for an armistice with the Germans, however, was welcomed by many in France in the hope that he could save at least something from an overwhelming defeat. His policies would be defended by supporters both during and since the war as having saved what could be saved in a disastrous situation created by the weaknesses of the previous republican leaders of France. German and French representatives met on 22 June, at German insistence in the very same railway car and at the same spot at Compiègne that had witnessed the signing of the armistice that ended World War I. The Germans dictated that they would occupy three-fifths of France, including Paris, with both the Channel and Atlantic coasts included in the occupied zone. France was also required to pay the costs of occupation.

2. The Vichy Regime and the Germans in France

2-A: Vichy and the National Revolution: The overwhelming defeat of France in June 1940 discredited the Third Republic and led directly to the handing of power to Marshal Philippe Pétain, a war hero from the defense of Verdun during the First World War. He and his supporters launched what they called the "National Revolution," to be characterized by a restoration to a supposedly more pure moral order and a return of the population from the cities, arguably centers of sin and corruption, to the countryside. Women were to focus on bearing children and being the center of the family, while men were to be the breadwinners. School books showed a benevolent Pétain as the father of his people, idolized by smiling young children. Pétain's political changes were facilitated by Pierre Laval, a seasoned parliamentary political figure who now became his second in command. As Paris was occupied by German forces, the government settled in the spa town of Vichy. Heavy German exactions, however, impeded the progress of the National Revolution as food was rationed

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

and a black market developed. As the war intensified, especially after the German defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943, and the Germans needed labor to replace their soldiers at the front. This led to the establishment of a compulsory French labor service for work in Germany [*Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO)*], which further discredited the National Revolution and led many of the French to flee to the countryside, becoming the core of the Resistance guerrillas.

2-B: The Germans in France: With their victory in 1940, the Germans re-annexed Alsace and Lorraine and settled into Paris and other French cities in the period sometimes referenced as “the beautiful days of the Occupation,” when it appeared that the Germans would stay definitely. The Germans frequently depicted France as cultured but also debased and inferior to their own “*Heimat*” or homeland, an image popularized in interwar Germany by Friedrich Sieburg, a journalist and literary critic, known for his book *Gott in Frankreich? ein Versuch*, published first in Germany in 1929 (translated into English in 1931 as *Is God A Frenchman?*) For many of the German soldiers in Paris, working in the luxurious Paris hotels, confiscated for their use, together with the attractions of Paris and other French cities now accessible to them made for a cushy billet, especially in contrast to the bloody and frozen battlefields of the Soviet Union after the German invasion of Russia in June 1942. Italian soldiers stationed in their zone of occupation were also removed from battlefields, in this case in North Africa, and were also closer to home. In Paris, a special unit of the German army organized tens of thousands of tours for their soldiers and photographs of the period show them at the Eiffel Tower, in Montmartre, and other well-established tourist spots. Cabarets and bars advertised the Can Can and other diversions for the occupation troops. Prostitution was regulated by the German army and Frenchwomen working in this capacity were required to be checked periodically by German medical personnel. Estimates range to as high as 200,000 babies born to Frenchwomen by German fathers during the Occupation, raising postwar issues for people who have been shunned because of their birth, over which they had no control.

3. Collaboration and Resistance

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

3-A: Collaboration – What did it mean to collaborate? After a meeting with Hitler in October 1940, Pétain declared: "I enter, today, into the path of collaboration." Two months later, an anti-German journalist wrote in his diary (published after the war): "Collaboration means: Give me your wristwatch. I will tell you the time." Differences have often been drawn between "collaborators," those who worked with the Germans out of what they saw as necessity, and "collaborationists," those who enthusiastically supported the Nazi vision of the future. A cluster of French political parties supporting full-scale collaboration with Nazi Germany emerged in Paris during the fall 1940. For them, Pétain and Vichy had not gone far enough in their pro-German policies and in remaking France. One movement was involved in a plot to blow up seven synagogues in Paris in October 1941. Others joined a volunteer legion that fought alongside the German army on the Russian front. Anti-Communism was a major motivation. By 1944, the *Milice Française* [French Militia] was engaged in civil war against the Resistance. By the end of the war, several thousand Frenchmen had volunteered for the Waffen-SS, where they saw combat on the Eastern front. Some of them, in the Charlemagne Division, ended up fighting in Berlin during the last days of the war. Following the war, many of them defended their actions by arguing that they were fighting Communism, or, as one put it, "to defend French people, one had to get one's hands dirty."

3-B: Resistance - Unity and Division: Following the defeat of June 1940 almost everyone in France expected German victory, making resistance futile. Upon seeing German soldiers in Paris, Henri Frenay, at first sympathetic to Vichy's National Revolution, felt that he needed to do something to uphold French honor because of the look of contempt he saw on the faces of the Germans when gazing at the French. He described his reaction as "a feeling of rape." Lucie Aubrac, an early Resistance fighter in Lyon, recalled her decision as an instinctual one of "refusal" to accept the defeat and occupation. Early resistance was limited to activities such as severing phone lines, vandalizing posters, and slashing tires on German vehicles. As millions of Frenchmen serving in the French Army had been taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940, there was a shortage of men in France during the Occupation, which explains why Frenchwomen played so prominent role in the Resistance. Some 60,000 Spanish Republican émigrés from the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s also fought in the French Resistance. By January 1943, Jean Moulin had persuaded the three main

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

resistance groups in the south of France to unite under de Gaulle. The establishment of the compulsory French labor service for work in Germany in the latter stages of the war, as noted earlier, led many of the French to take up resistance in the countryside, becoming the core of the Resistance guerrillas, who became known as the *maquis*," a Corsican Italian slang term for bandits, whose root word was *macchia*, the term for the scrubland and forests of Corsica. By 1943, the Resistance had shifted from an urban to a rural force, most active in central and southern France.

4. Life in Occupied France

4-A: Accommodation: While many in France suffered during the Occupation, the country did not endure the fate of other occupied areas, notably Poland, in Eastern Europe. Most of the French just tried somehow to survive in hopes of better days. For many in France, life went on and they tried to accommodate themselves as best they could. Some of the French people, who lived in small villages, especially in southern France, may have never encountered a German soldier, while others in Paris could watch them parade every day down the Champs-Élysées in Paris. A slogan that appeared in popular Paris magazines as the Occupation began was "Paris is still Paris." Magazines such as *Paris Programmes* emphasized the continuity of "life goes on." As the Germans settled in, it was often said that "they are taking everything," and, indeed, Hermann Göring and other Nazi leaders made it clear that if anyone was going to suffer, it was not going to be the Germans. Photos from the period invariably show the long lines for basic necessities that became the norm, especially for the women whose role included the obtaining of food for their families. A complex ration system, that became known as the infamous "System D," put a premium on ingenuity and black market purchasing, which became a regular feature of life for many. Urban dwellers who had family in the countryside from whom they might occasionally obtain produce were the fortunate ones. By the end of the Occupation, 71% of the average household budget went to food. As the war went on, French civilians also suffered the effects of Allied air raids intensified in anticipation of an eventual landing in France. The Allies bombed Rouen more than two dozen times during the war.

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

4-B: The Art World under Occupation: The art world continued in Paris, where exhibitions were staged in museums and galleries, except that Jewish-owned galleries were closed and their contents requisitioned. They now showed drawings by German soldiers, some of whom were encouraged to enroll in drawing classes in Montmartre and elsewhere. Arno Breker, a German architect and sculptor who had lived in Paris prior to the war and who accompanied Hitler on his June 1940 tour of the city, had his work displayed amid great fanfare at the Orangerie gallery in Paris in May 1942. Works of art requisitioned from Jewish antique dealers and collectors included the Rothschild family collection, and many still have not been restored to their former owners or their heirs. Some potentially endangered artists, including Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, and André Masson; literary figures such as Heinrich Mann; and Max Ophüls and other filmmakers; were saved by the efforts of the American journalist Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee, who helped get them out of France in the early days of the Occupation. Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, although under increasingly tense conditions, continued to write and publish during the Occupation. With many other avenues of entertainment closed, cinema attendance grew significantly, especially as theaters provided escapes from the often harsh world outside and offered warm places to visit in winter when heating material was scarce. Special theaters were set up for German soldiers. Film stars whose performances were viewed by many included Danielle Darrieux, Arletty, and Corinne Luchaire, whose father was a leading collaborationist journalist. Nightclubs also flourished, especially for German soldiers in Paris. Édith Piaf became a star at the Bobino cabaret in Montparnasse. She performed in occupied Paris for Wehrmacht officers and went on a promotion tour in Germany. German organizations such as Kunstschutz [Art Protection] were established ostensibly to evaluate and protect French art that came under German control. They helped maintain for the Germans an image of a highly cultured people working more diligently than even the French themselves to protect the art of the occupied country.

5. Victims and Liberation

5-A: The Jews and Others: The French authorities were also involved in the restrictions on France's Jewish population. In October 1940, the first of

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

France's "Statute of the Jews" banned them from the practice of the law, universities, medicine, and public service. Jewish businesses were often "Aryanized," placed in the hands of so-called "Aryan" trustees who often engaged in blatant corruption while Jews were banned from cinemas, music halls, fairs, museums, libraries, public parks, cafes, theatres, concerts, restaurants, swimming pools, and markets. Differentiations were made between "Israélites," who were deemed "properly" assimilated French Jews and "Juifs," or "Jews," seen as "foreign" and "unassimilated," often depicted as criminals from abroad living in slums in the inner cities of France. The archives of the Shoah Museum in Paris contain large numbers of letters in which local people denounced neighbors as "Jews," in hopes of gaining a part of their confiscated property. By June 1942, all Jews living in the occupied zone were forced to wear a yellow star of David with the words "Juif" or "Juive" at all times. Some 13,000 Jewish men, women, and children were arrested in July 1942 and brought to the Vélodrome d'Hiver, a sports stadium in Paris, from where they were sent to a holding camp in the Paris suburb of Drancy and finally to Auschwitz. The Roma population were interned in camps by the French authorities in efforts to forcibly assimilate them and many suffered under poor conditions although most appear to have survived the war.

5-B: Liberation: At the end of May 1944, General Dwight Eisenhower, in charge of the Allied armies in western Europe, ordered that a nationwide guerilla war be launched in all of the regions of France with the start of Operation Overlord, the drive to liberate France. The Allies landed on Normandy beaches on 6 June 1944. Four days later, *Der Führer* regiment of the *Das Reich* division destroyed the town of Oradour-sur-Glane, killing 642 people including 246 women and 207 children. Many of the victims were locked into a church and burnt. The ruined old village is maintained as it was as a memorial. Eisenhower planned to bypass Paris in August while Hitler ordered General Dietrich von Choltitz, in command there, to destroy the city rather than allowing the city be liberated. Eventually, Choltitz agreed to surrender the city to the Allies and in his subsequent retelling he claimed to have saved the city. The liberation also brought out fissures among the various Resistance factions. Ultimately, to avoid having to give power to local Resistance leaders, de Gaulle ordered French soldiers under General Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque to enter Paris. On 25 August 1944, General de Gaulle led a parade through liberated Paris

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

and gave a speech at the City Hall. Pétain, Laval, and other Vichy leaders are taken by the fleeing Germans to Sigmaringen Castle in western Germany. Recent histories have called into question the behavior of some of the Allied soldiers, whose actions, especially in regard to French women, has been contrasted with what has been argued was the more “correct” behavior of the invading German soldiers of 1940.

6. An Incomplete Purge followed by 75 Years of Retrospectives

6-A: Purge – “Wild” followed by “legal.” Immediately following the liberation, France was swept by a wave of executions, public humiliations, assaults and detentions of suspected collaborators as many took matters into their own hands. Popular convictions and summary executions, possibly some 10,000 across France, characterized these non-legal actions, that were also accompanied by the public shaving of the heads of women suspected of having had relations with the Germans. Women were paraded publicly in various states of undress, sometimes carrying the infants to whom they had given birth during the Occupation. Much of the severity of the punishments depended upon when a suspected collaborator was caught. A suspect caught by the crowd in the immediate aftermath of the liberation generally was much more severely punished for the same infraction as another, caught later, when passions had subsided. In their legal purge, from 1944 through 1951, courts in France sentenced 6,763 people to death (3,910 in absentia) for treason and other offenses. Only 791 executions were actually carried out. More common was the penalty of “national degradation,” a loss of civil rights, which was meted out to 49,723 people. In an attempt to heal divisions after the liberation, the government focused on a relatively small number of clearly identified collaborators, while suggesting that the bulk of the population had been sympathetic to the Resistance. Amnesties were granted in 1947, 1951, and 1953. Many, among the police for example, resumed their careers in the state bureaucracy.

6-B: Postwar Retrospectives: Given the plurality of French reactions during the Occupation, it is not surprising that the war years have been remembered in many different and evolving ways in the years since then. As Paris was liberated on 25 August 1944, General de Gaulle addressed a crowd from the Hôtel de Ville balcony in which he emphasized the role of

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

the French in contrast to that of the Allies in the victory. This argument helped create what has been called "the myth" that all France, except for a handful of traitors had been united in resisting the Germans. Robert Aron's *Histoire de Vichy* maintained in 1954 that the Free French had been France's sword and the Vichy government France's shield during the war and that both had been needed to save as much in France as possible. Museums dedicated to the liberation began opening immediately after and there are now more than thirty in Normandy alone. The release in 1969 of the film "The Sorrow and the Pity," which included interviews with collaborators and highlighted the ambiguities in the attitudes of the French during the war, followed by the publication in 1972 of Robert O. Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, which critiqued the "Resistancialist myth," fed continuing controversy over the role of France during the war. Subsequent events that focused the attention of many on the war years included the trial and conviction in Lyon in 1987 of Klaus Barbie for crimes against humanity, the assassination in 1993 of former Vichy Police Minister René Bousquet while awaiting trial on similar charges, and the conviction in 1998 of Maurice Papon, former chief of Vichy police, for related crimes. The year 2005 saw the inauguration of the Memorial of the Shoah in Paris and in 2015 the French government officially opened its World War II archives to historians. On 25 August 2019, the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Paris, a new museum, the Musée de la Libération was inaugurated in Paris. While focusing on the liberation of the city and the role of Jean Moulin, as Resistance unifier, and General Leclerc, who led the Free French forces into Paris, the museum also highlights the role of women, as well as the complexities in analyzing the "accommodation" behavior during the wartime years. Brasillach's statement prior to his execution was half correct. While "sweet" is hardly the best description of France's experience of the Occupation, the memory has most definitely remained.

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Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

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Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

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Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

Films (listed chronologically)

Note: For a more extensive list running from 1944 through 1989, see "French Films and World War II," see Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, pp. 318-323 (listed under Books above).

1945: Marcel Carné, "Enfants du Paradis" [Children of Paradise].

1946: René Clément, "La Bataille du Rail" [The Battle of the Rails].

1949: Jean-Pierre Melville, "Le Silence de la Mer" [The Silence of the Sea], based on Vercors' book of 1942.

1956: Alain Resnais, "Nuit et Brouillard" [Night and Fog].

1959: Christian-Jaque, "Babette s'en va-t-en guerre" [Babette Goes to War].

1966: René Clément, "Paris brûle-t-il?" [Is Paris Burning?]

1969: Marcel Ophüls, "Le Chagrin et la Pitié" [The Sorrow and the Pity].

1972: André Harris and Alain de Sedouy, "Français si vous saviez" [French People, If You Knew].

1974: Louis Malle, "Lacombe Lucien."

1975: André Halimi, "Chantons sous l'Occupation" [Singing during the Occupation].

1980: François Truffaut, "Le Dernier Métro" [The Last Métro].

1985: Claude Lanzmann, "Shoah."

1987: Louis Malle, "Au Revoir les Enfants" [Goodbye, Children].

1988: Marcel Ophüls, "Hôtel Terminus: Klaus Barbie, sa vie et son temps" [Hôtel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie].

Gordon, The Germans in France During World War II: Defeat, Occupation, Liberation, and Memory

1993: Jean Marboeuf, "Pétain."

1997: Claude Berri, "Lucie Aubrac."

2008: Paule Muxel and Bertrand de Solliers, "L'année dernière à Vichy" [The Last Year at Vichy].

2009-2017: "Un village française." A French television series about the lives of fictional residents in a village under German occupation. Aired on prime-time French television.

2015: Saul Dibb and Matt Charman, "Suite Française."

2016: Lola Doillon, "Le Voyage de Fanny" [Fanny's Journey].