

I A N O U S B Y



OCCUPATION

THE ORDEAL OF FRANCE 1940-1944

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Occupation

The Ordeal of France, 1940–1944

IAN OUSBY



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I will never believe that people are made for war. But I also know that they are not made for servitude either.

Jean Guéhenno, 17 June 1940

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Preface

I AM ENGLISH. I was born in 1947. I have no formal training as a historian. In other words, I lack all the obvious qualifications for writing about the German occupation of France during the Second World War – a subject jealously guarded first by a generation of writers (usually French) who had lived through the experience and then by a generation of academic historians (not always French) who have built up a complex body of scholarship, still enlarging by the minute. So, to start with, I owe the reader at least a word of explanation about how I came to write this book and what function I intend it to serve.

The second, and more important, matter is simple to explain. My aim has been to write a short history of the Occupation in its various aspects – social and cultural, as well as political and military – for the general reader rather than the specialist. The fact that such a book does not already exist (at least not in English) is no rebuke to the academics who have in recent years done so much to shed new light on the period. Indeed, it is precisely in such times of re-evaluation, when established views are challenged and new ones breed controversy, that general readers tend to get neglected.

I myself certainly began by feeling the consequences of this neglect during my time in France over the last decade. Like so many visitors, I was struck by the imprint that the Occupation, though it is now a good fifty years in the past, has left on contemporary France. It is there most obviously in a habit of official commemoration. Towns name their central squares after the exact day when they were liberated in 1944, or after the day shortly beforehand when local people were massacred. The generals commanding the French divisions in the Allied armies give their names to main streets: the Rue Général Leclerc in the north, the Avenue de Lattre de Tassigny in the south. *Résistants* are remembered everywhere, though on plaques and monuments put up by their surviving comrades rather than on the civic war memorials listing those who died in 1914–18 or during the fall of France in 1940. On the wall of a house in a back street, or beside a busy road, or in the overgrown depths of a wood, one comes across the reminder that this particular *résistant* or this particular group of *résistants* died on this particular spot. The inscriptions often speak in uncompromising terms of cowardly betrayals and barbarous atrocities, and the monuments themselves are always immaculately tended.

To the visitor from England such reminders – local, fragmentary, only partly understood though they may be – bring home the force of the question Jean-Paul Sartre first asked when the events themselves were barely over: ‘How can the people of the free countries be made to realize what life was like under the Occupation?’ His implied answer, obviously, was that they could not: that *we* could not. And he was undoubtedly right. Even with the greatest imagination, the most careful reconstruction, the most detailed scholarship, the gap between the French experience and the British

experience in the Second World War remains unbridgeable. Yet, of course, this is not to say that the effort is worthless. It is perhaps now more tantalizing than ever to make it, and more instructive too.

For the British, consideration of what it meant for France to be occupied has always involved covert self-questioning. If we had been occupied too, what would have happened to us? How would we have behaved? Always uneasy, these questions are now tinged with a sort of speculative guilt prompted by the stock which the French themselves have been taking of their own record. Sartre characterized the different memories separating Britain and France by saying that ‘a past which fills London with pride was, for Paris, marked with shame and despair’. This put the matter with a bluntness that was unwelcome so soon after the events. In general the French, understandably, reacted to their ordeal by retreating into a myth (my epilogue shows how it can fairly be called the Gaullist myth) of a people united in hostility to the Nazi occupiers, of a nation of *résistants*. For our part, we in Britain were content to accept the myth – though of course we insisted, in the films and popular literature which flourished in my childhood, on giving British agents a flatteringly prominent role, usually the leading role, in resistance.

Even from the start, however, the myth could not completely stifle the sense of shame and despair to which Sartre testified. Alongside the official commemorations, an act of collective forgetting was also required. It was written quite literally into the title of André Mornet’s book published in 1949, *Quatre années à rayer de notre histoire (Four Years to Strike from Our History)*. What had to be forgotten was not France’s defeat in 1940 or the brutality of her occupiers, of course. What had to be forgotten was what the French had done to the French. So when, in July 1946, an official monument was unveiled on the spot where the politician Georges Mandel had been killed in the forest of Fontainebleau two years before, its inscription spoke of him as having been ‘murdered by the enemies of France’ – the bland phrase deliberately failing to specify that his murderers were Frenchmen. And when, a decade later, Alain Resnais made his documentary film about Auschwitz, *Nuit et brouillard (Night and Fog)*, the censors objected to footage which showed that the Jews deported from the camp at Pithiviers were herded into the trains not by German soldiers but by French gendarmes.

The paradoxes inherent even in the attempt to forget were already apparent in Mornet’s book: a history of something that should be forgotten which in fact concluded that it could not be forgotten. The attempt to remember and to confront the past began in the 1970s with (to cite two very different but equally influential works) Marcel Ophüls’ film *Le Chagrin et la pitié (The Sorrow and the Pity)*, released in 1971, and Robert O. Paxton’s scholarly study *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–44*, published in 1972. Most of what has been said and written about the Occupation since then has explored the questions such works opened up. Purely academic inquiry has moved in step with events in French public life which have made headlines outside France: the arrest and trial of French wartime officials for their misdeeds, for example, and the revelations which President Mitterrand chose to make just before his death about the ambiguities of his own past.

A myth of national heroism succeeded by a determination to investigate national shame: even so crude a description of how the French have lived with their past

suggests the discomforts that history can hold fifty years afterwards. Yet, in its very crudity, the description hardly begins to answer the important questions about what really happened during the Occupation: what was heroic, what was shameful, in what proportions they flourished in the same soil, and why. These, of course, were precisely the questions which prompted me to embark on this work.

The need to address them in a book designed for an English audience was confirmed by the reactions of various friends. Some, knowing I was writing a history of the Occupation, would still insist on referring to it as a history of the Resistance. Rather more asked me, with some embarrassment, if my research had 'lowered my opinion of the French'. I reminded the former that, sadly, a history of the Occupation is not the same thing as a history of the Resistance. I told the latter that it had not altered my respect for the French, though it had sometimes lowered my opinion of human nature, just as it had sometimes raised it. Those who look at how people in another time and another country behaved in an hour of darkness find no easy clue as to how they themselves might behave should they suffer a similar ordeal. Instead they find what Václav Havel, with his eye on different events altogether, had occasion to remind us in 1990: 'It is extremely shortsighted to believe that the face society happens to be presenting to you at a given moment is its only true face. None of us knows all the potentialities that slumber in the spirit of the population.'

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