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Resisting in France and *la vie inventée*

Scott Soo

*La Résistance a été une façon de vivre, un style de vie, la vie inventée. Aussi demeure-t-elle dans son souvenir comme une période de nature unique, hétérogène à toute autre réalité, sans communication et incommunicable, presque un songe*¹

The daily experience of resistance in occupied France has often been missing from accounts of *les années noires*. Whether concerned with the deeds of prominent resisters or with the deconstruction of national myths, history has often obscured the experiences of the majority of the significant minority who opted to rebel against oppression. The first two years of the Occupation are often overshadowed by the move towards a unified movement and the increasingly combative stance of the Resistance of the following years. This may be partly related to the difficulty in placing such disparate realities into a coherent methodological framework. Equally, an analysis of events that possessed a surreal and almost dreamlike quality by those that witnessed them may have discouraged attempts to gain a deeper awareness of the phenomenon of resistance. In some respects, it did occupy a different sphere of reality for those that chose not to obey the armistice could be considered marginal in their behaviour and their memory remained so in post-war France as the demands of national reconstruction produced a dominant representation of the period which obscured the experience of the individual. This paper seeks to explore this sub-reality through an analysis of *la vie inventée* and its manifestation within the creation of an *esprit de résistance*, the transmission of this consciousness and the inversion of the hegemony of the Vichy régime. Finally, it will question whether this notion was born from or conversely a prerequisite to *La Résistance*.

Aims and Approaches

The examination of *la vie inventée* does not purport to capture the essence of the past in the form of a primordial truth. This is not to deny the existence of the past but rather endeavours to convey some of the experiences which arose out of the actions of refusal in France. These will not be presented within a framework that claims to portray reality as it really was since this was infinitely more mosaic and complex than what could be contained within this particular narrative. Nevertheless, this is not to admit that

*History is a discourse, a language game; within it 'truth' and similar expressions are devices to open, regulate and shut down interpretations.*²

The notion of invention is a theme which occurs both within oral testimonies and the historiography of the period. It does not privilege one particular aspect of the resistance discourse but rather provides another medium of interpretation which is located not above but amongst other interpretations. The sum total of such discourses offers a more complex and yet complete analysis of this aspect of France's past.

This particular discourse, incorporating characteristics as such as invention, ingenuity, initiative, guile and ruse cannot be found in a top down approach to the study of resistance. A focus on the leaders and organisations is not helpful in a study of this kind for various reasons. Firstly, it would obscure the countless individual forms of resistance which occurred throughout the occupation. Furthermore, this type of investigation often conveys a misleading sense of homogeneity which evidently smothers the diversity of groups (both

between and within) and of individuals. Many if not most of the groups involved in resistance were born out of local initiatives which later became attached to national organisations. Not all individuals remained attached to one particular organisation. The co-operation between and interdependence of some groups resulted in multi-membership. Roger «Maurice» Jaquier, who sold type writers for a living in Toulouse was simultaneously involved in «*Les Petites Ailes Blanches*», the *Béryl* network, the *Gallia* network, *Libération-Sud* and the *Veny group*.³ Lastly, a consideration of such organisation solely in political terms, the *Francs-Tireurs et partisans français* (F.T.F.P) as communist, for example, ignores the apoliticism and main motivations for some of its participants. Pierre Labie a maquisard in the F.T.F.P asserts that

*we had no idea that the movement was seen as communist until after the liberation of Toulouse. No one was political. We were just simple country people*⁴

Whilst this particular example of apoliticism would seem to completely reverse the picture it is certainly true that for some political ideology was of little if no importance. Others were influenced by partisan attitudes but regarded them as secondary to the task of liberating France. This is not to deny that strong rivalry existed between certain groups and individuals but certainly accounts for the unity of purpose felt by people from both ends of the political, social and economic spectrum.

In light of such complexity, it is perhaps unsurprising that a conceptualisation of the resistance has, until relatively recently, been marked by its absence from much of the historiography.⁵ François Bédarida has attempted to define resistance by the use of Weber's notion of the ideal type which aims to embrace the unity and diversity of the phenomenon.⁶ As a model, the ideal type should fulfil the criteria of both objectivity and subjectivity. This concept, however, appears rather formulaic and also less convincing if focus is shifted to actions of resistance as opposed to the organisation of the Resistance. Jean-Marie Guillon, on the other hand, postulates whether it is even possible to define the Resistance outside of the context within which it occurs⁷ and thus refers to resistances. The difficulty in linking the general to the specific may be overcome by adopting Paula Schwartz's view which regards resistance not so much as

*an operation conducted by a few, but a system of action supported by many. It was a series of small, nearly imperceptible elements which formed a larger construct.*⁸

An emphasis on action is also a concern of James C Scott who further argues that a distinction between individual, uncoordinated acts and organised group activity can be misleading when evaluating their overall effect upon the system of domination.⁹ A broader concept of resistance avoids the dichotomy that arises when distinguishing between active / passive, male / female, illegal / legal, communist / gaullist etc. forms of resistance. Furthermore, it is not reliant upon a strict chronological timetable for resistance to the oppressive ideas and practices of the occupiers began at various times and in various ways. An expanded notion is consequently more helpful in illustrating how the symbolic and physical violence of the hegemony of the Nazi and Vichy régimes was questioned and increasingly challenged throughout the Occupation by a significant body of both men and women.

The Early Days

The first instances of resistance have often been depicted as individual, spontaneous, instinctive; actions born out of the need to '*faire quelque chose*'. Deprived of an army the only arm available to those who wished to register their disapproval was initiative. There was

no methodology to refer to, no guidelines to follow; no apparent leader to follow; resistance above all had to be created. In this climate of uncertainty, refusal was expressed in a variety of ways and must have seemed illusory to many given the scale of the French defeat and widespread passive support for the armistice negotiated by the former hero of Verdun, *le Maréchal Pétain*.

The first Resistance tract has been attributed to Edmond Michelet, a Catholic Democrat in Brive-la-Gaillarde, situated in the centre of France, who reprinted texts by the poet Charles Péguy declaring that '*those who do not give in are right and those who do are wrong*'.¹⁰ Romain Baz and his wife in Annemasse, the Haute-Savoie, typed and distributed their own tracts calling on people not to accept defeat.¹¹ Amongst these initiatives can be included the broadcast of the General de Gaulle, described as a relatively, young, politically naive and provisional general, his appeal was a '*pioneer voice of revolt*'.¹² Heard by few and vague in content it offered no practical solution but symbolised the conviction that the struggle was not over. Symbolic or otherwise, what was immediately apparent, though, was that the more overt and spectacular forms of action which seemed to pose even the most unlikely threat to the German military could lead to devastating consequences. On 17 June 1940, Mme Bourgeois was tied to a tree and shot for berating and harassing German soldiers who had requisitioned her home.¹³ The agricultural worker, Etienne Achavanne was executed for having cut the telephone wires of an airport occupied by the Wermacht on 20 June 1940.¹⁴ The demonstration on 11 November in Paris by students and pupils seemed to stage its own occupation as the Champs Elysées was held for two hours.¹⁵ However, its dispersal by machine gun fire and concomitant injuries underlined the potential danger of relying on traditional forms of protest. Significantly, though, it also illustrates the ingenuity and effectiveness of cultural forms of protest. The two long poles or *deux gaules*¹⁶ carried by each student must have signified much to the French populace if nothing to the German troops.

The immediacy of German soldiers in the northern zone certainly made any quixotic forms of action extremely hazardous. There was more freedom of manoeuvre in the southern zone and yet initial activity in both zones largely consisted of secret initiatives involving the transmission of ideals. The observation amongst French and German police records that there were no serious problems of dissent for the Vichy regime until well into 1941¹⁷ may have indicated a misleading absence of resistance activity. The lack of any perceived direct threat to the régime and the relative absence of physical revolt did not signify resignation. Beneath the surface, initiatives were being made to reverse the hegemony of the dominant culture. Whilst individual ingenuity had provided the catalyst, the disparate actions of the few needed to be drawn into a system of action, for resisting could only become an effective form of rebellion as a collective enterprise. Overt forms of protest which seemed to represent a direct threat to either the Germans or Vichy were more likely to be met with repression and unlikely to achieve long-term results. The open military confrontation of the latter stages of the Occupation and the transition to post-war government may have resulted in a great deal more bloodshed had not the hegemony of Vichy been challenged and replaced so effectively. Under authoritarian rule what were the daily mechanisms for the transmission of this *esprit de résistance*; a refusal to submit that united differing values from a lay, republican, humanistic tradition to a patriotic instinct of freedom from foreign invasion; what were the 'everyday weapons' of revolt?

Spreading the Word

Communication through correspondence and by telephone was monitored by both the German military and Vichy. Despite or even in spite of this some did choose to register their

protest by post. The archives of the German military administration in Paris contain anonymous letters addressed to the new regime containing insults and sarcastic remarks. The German decree in October 1940 advising the population to report any household sheltering English persons upon the pain of death was followed by a letter signed by Adolph Hitler and expressing the desire to conform to the decree by reporting the date and time that the sender's wife would be sheltering some English fugitives.¹⁸ An intercepted letter addressed to the British Consul in Lisbon from an anonymous person in Rouen reveals that some tried to pass on military intelligence about the enemy.¹⁹ Chain letters inciting resistance through their diffusion can also be found in the archives relating to the *contrôle technique*.²⁰ The existence of all of these letters emphasises the risk entailed in the use of traditional means of communication.

Individuals found new ways in which to publicly manifest their patriotism or rejection of Fascism. On a personal level, the presence of the enemy in the department of Basse-Normandie did not prevent a woman from Deauville from cycling around on a bicycle which was painted in the form of the Tricolore for the duration of the Occupation or a baker from Livarot sporting the cross of Lorraine on his wheelbarrow. In Caen and Lisieux men and women wore badges of the same cross which were for a while on sale in certain shops.²¹ The cross of Lorriane, 'vive de Gaulle' and the letter V were to become common signifiers of the Resistance and allied victory as they were painted on walls, buildings and memorials. Such examples were forms of individual expression that required little if no planning or organisation. They may appear anecdotal but in fact represent part of a wider phenomenon that legitimised the Resistance and contested the symbolic order of Occupied France. Paradoxically, it is perhaps the anecdotal aspect that was crucial to their effect, without attracting severe repression they manifested a public hostility towards the Wermacht using forms of behaviour that became the norm for like-minded people across the whole of the country.

Funerals provided the opportunity for the manifestation and transmission of symbolic forms of resistance on a collective level. The funeral of the of de Gaulle's mother who died shortly after his broadcast became a spontaneous collective act of resistance. Despite transportation difficulties and the refusal of the authorities to allow any mention of her surname in the obituary it was attended by many and was accorded military honours by local gendarmes.²² Funerals of hostages or resisters killed by the Wermacht or by the Vichy régime equally provided the occasion for public displays of solidarity and opposition in which symbolic confrontation was manifested by the marked presence of local communities. On some occasions it would appear that national identity was subordinate to an identity that transcended national boundaries in its expression of democratic ideals and solidarity. The funerals of allied airmen killed in combat was often attended by an impressive number of local people.²³

Disseminating information regarding imminent demonstrations was often achieved by word of mouth. At a cinema in Caen showing a propaganda film depicting German military successes became a site of rebellion for several days. A call to arms was transmitted in the locality and local youths turned up to drown the commentary with whistles each time an image depicting the Wermacht's success appeared on the screen.²⁴ The spread of revolt by word of mouth was certainly a preoccupation of the Vichy government. Reports from the department of the Lot to the *Commissaire Général à l'Information* reflect the initiatives taken by grassroots communists independent of the ambiguity of the party line during the Nazi-Soviet pact together with the fear of the efficacy of speech as a transmissive agent;

les communistes continuent à se terrorer, mais il est de toute nécessité d'exercer sur eux une surveillance de tous les instants, parce qu'ils se camouflent avec audace et

*que, par la propagande «de bouche à oreille» ils pourraient faire du mal non seulement auprès des populations rurales mais encore excercer une action néfaste sur les permissionnaires.*²⁵

Given the inherent paucity of documents produced by clandestine groups, the history of the Resistance is in some respects the history of the spoken word. As a transmissive agent, rumour, has been noted as being particularly suited to insurgency movements. Ranajit Guha, writing about peasant insurgency in colonial India, underlines the opacity of this form of communication that could not be traced to one or more known individuals. He claims that

*in no country with a predominantly illiterate population has subaltern protest of any significant strength ever exploded without its charge being conducted over vast areas by rumour.*²⁶

Clearly, there was a significant difference between the level of literacy in colonial India and 1940s France. However, transmission by word of mouth was equally due to difficulties in the use of the written word. As well as providing anonymity for the initial source, rumour did not compromise its messengers or require the production of tracts and was thus quicker in its deliverance. The speed with which speech can respond to ‘any given stimulus more urgently, emotionally and dynamically than written utterance’ is a crucial quality according to Vachek. It is this aspect which furthermore encourages a sense of solidarity stemming from the desire to share information.²⁷ In his monthly report of July 1941 the Commandant of the Gendarmerie in Monmasson, department of the Eure, describes how the English radio (BBC) is listened to by a large part of the population who subsequently diffuse the news by word of mouth.²⁸ In the case of the maquis, the solidarity between certain local communities and maquis groups offered ideal conditions for the circulation of rumour. The forewarning of imminent raids enabled groups to in the case of the Maquis Bochetto / des Lacs in the Aveyron to leave the area,²⁹ or in the case of the AS maquis in the Cévenol area of Lasalle, seize the initiative.³⁰

Insurgency movements, however, do not possess a monopoly on this or indeed any other technique used in their struggle. Rumour was also used by the Vichy authorities to undermine the cohesion of resistance groups. The infiltration of a group in Marseille by a police agent led to the arrest of Joseph Pastor, a member of the Communist party. Following his escape from Vichy custody he experienced considerable difficulties with the party in Marseille because of a police rumour stating that he was the police agent who had betrayed his colleagues.³¹ The function of rumour thus extends beyond the transmission of the truth. This latter attribute was particularly functional to the existence and expansion of the maquis. The legendary nature of the maquis, according to HR Kedward, was neither a post-war invention nor based on nostalgia but was in fact structural to its growth.³² The ingenious use of men and weapons such as explosives to create an illusion of greater numbers and force convinced the authorities that they were dealing with a greater military threat than was actually the case. According to a former maquis member in the Auvergne

*notre but principal, c'était tout d'abord d'essayer de créer un climat psychologique pour les Allemands, de les tenir toujours un peu sous la terreur.*³³

Turning the Tables

Evidently, communication amongst resisters was not confined to speech alone though it was integral to the transmission of the *esprit de résistance* and creation of resistance groups. The individual initiatives taken by people such as Romain Baz and his wife or Edmond Michelet in the production of tracts at the start of the Occupation represented the

beginning of a much wider phenomenon. The production of clandestine tracts, newspapers and even books was crucial to the public expression of the Resistance and during the first two years of *les années noires* represented much of the activity of resistance groups. In particular, it played a significant role in the inversion of the values of Vichy's National Revolution epitomised by the triptych '*Travail, Famille, Patrie*'. Rather than provide the foundations for a new France the three pillars of the régime's programme became sites of rebellion.

Socio-professional contacts were a primary means of recruitment and the workplace itself offered a forum for the discussion and perpetuation of the *esprit de résistance*. In the northern zone one of the first Resistance groups, the *Musée de l'Homme*, was named after the ethnography museum where several of its members worked. The workplace was transformed into a site of rebellion as the group met weekly in Louis Martin-Chauffier's Paris office and the museum's mimeograph machine used to print clandestine literature. Its first newspaper issued 15 December 1940 called on people to resist;

*To resist is to keep your heart and head. But above all, it means acting - doing something that will bring about positive results; rational and useful acts.*³⁴

It is evident that resisting did not restrict itself to combat but could represent any action that sought to uphold *la liberté*. Shortly after the issue of the first paper the group was decimated after being infiltrated. The extent to which the German army considered the production and distribution of Resistance writings a threat is reflected in the severity of their repression. The ten people who were arrested were sentenced to death; the seven men were shot almost immediately and the three women were deported.

In the southern zone, it was initially relatively easier to meet and discuss ideas in public. That said there were certain categories of people that were under surveillance from the very beginning, notably communists and the Spanish exiles. Despite the ambiguity of the French Communist party leadership's neutralist position vis à vis the Nazi-Soviet pact, activity was taking place at a grassroots level. To some extent, this activity had been occurring ever since the party had been made illegal by the government of the Third Republic. Certain communist party members took the initiative to recreate party structures using former trade union connections. Before his arrest, in September 1940, Joseph Pastor had managed to reconstitute the party in the south of Marseille between January and July 1940.³⁵ Though restructuring for some communist groups was a continuation from before the fall of France there was a clear change of circumstance. The authorities of the Occupation were more proactive in their surveillance and succeeded in taking advantage of the inexperience of certain party members in clandestine activity. A lack of prudence enabled police agents to infiltrate groups as they were in the process of restructuring as was the case of Joseph Pastor. The lack of experience and prudence was noted, in the memoirs of Colonel Oscar Reile, head of the *Abwehr III-F* and one of those responsible for repression in France, as causing heavy losses.³⁶ A strong sense of vigilance was consequently cardinal in the Resistance and is described by Alain Guérin as forming an essential weapon in this respect.³⁷ The concierge often fulfilled the need for vigilance and more by warning resisters of police inquiries as well as giving false information to pursuers or offering space for meetings or shelter. According to Paula Schwartz the concierge exemplified the support roles of women that supported and reinforced the efforts of resisters living clandestinely. The distinction between Resistance roles in the use of labels such as *sédentaire* or *illégal*, should not obscure the fact that the consequences if captured were of equal severity for the two groups.

The need for vigilance was certainly true for the exiled Spanish Republicans whose movements were monitored by the Wehrmacht, Vichy and the Embassy of Nationalist Spain.³⁸ Nevertheless, certain individuals managed to find new ways of resisting in the workplace.

Whilst working for the German army, Juan Parra Gonzalez and his comrades sabotaged a total of twelve concrete mixers by throwing sand into the motor.³⁹ Statistical data pertaining to such acts will never be known for it was difficult to identify mistakes as ‘accidents’ or otherwise and yet it is certain that there was neither a lack of diversity nor ingenuity involved in disrupting an economy that was largely directed towards the German war effort. The aircraft industry based at Toulouse undoubtedly suffered from a range of errors in the production and assembly of equipment designated for the German armed forces. Similarly, locomotives used to ferry German equipment were sometimes affected by ‘poor maintenance’, a factor that also affected machinery within certain factories.⁴⁰ As noted by a Georges Beyer, a leader of the F.T.F.P, workers themselves were ideally suited in their ability to combine knowledge of working practices with their own ingenuity

*dans la réalité il y avait ce que nous pouvions savoir nous-mêmes et tout ce que nous pouvions inventer et puis, surtout, il y avait ce que les gars sur place inventaient à partir de ce qu'ils savaient. Des tas de procédés ingénieux de sabotage ont ainsi été trouvés.*⁴¹

Paradoxically, an excessive dose of vigilance could also provide the basis for subverting the administration. The literal and excessive bureaucracy practised by certain Gendarmes in the search for *défaillants* of the *Service de Travail Obligatoire* (STO) was structural to the creation and expansion of the ‘culture of the outlaw’.⁴² In many areas of the southern zone this expanded from being a sub-culture to a veritable counter-culture that legitimated the alternative authority to Vichy rule. This undoubtedly benefited from the actions of certain gendarmes and concomitant support of other figures of authority. In the Cévennes, the schoolteacher, curé and the pastor provided a moral and republican justification for resisting Vichy.⁴³

The phenomenon of resistance relied upon ingenuity in the workplace but also the invention of new professions such as the ‘*passeur*’ or ‘*agent de liaison*’. The ubiquitous liaison agent on her bicycle exemplifies a role that required an almost constant ability to innovate. Many accounts of this form of work are notable for the ability to use prevailing gender-stereotypes as a cover for their work. Deprived of traditional forms of communication, agents such as Anne-Marie Soucelier deposited up to twenty messages in one day⁴⁴ in various *boîtes aux lettres* that could be situated amongst other places in restaurants, cafés and hotels.

Small businesses were often family affairs and in certain cases so was the Resistance. The family as a site of subversion provided another means of recruitment, conceived new identities and opportunities for female political expression, and offered shelter to fugitives. The *résistante* Lise Lesèvre simultaneously viewed the resistance as a family and the family as a source of resistance.⁴⁵ Whilst it may be argued that the support roles provided by some women were an extension of roles within the home, it should be noted that the identity of the maquis ‘godmother’ or ‘guardian angel’ was essentially a new identity forged out of resistance. The function that Lise Lesèvre provided as ‘godmother’ to the youth in the maquis near Grenoble⁴⁶ was manifest of the subversion of the Vichy régime’s perception of family virtues symbolised by the *fête des mères*. In addition to the symbolic, certain family homes had to physically adapt to resistance activities by creating ways of disguising the sometimes constant flow of visitors, the shelter of fugitives and related problems of alimentation, or the noise of the typewriter in the production of tracts.⁴⁷ Sadly, however, the participation of a whole family in resistance activities could threaten its very existence. Some families such as that of Lise Lesèvre were decimated by repression whilst others were torn apart by divided loyalties. A letter from a Parisian grandmother denouncing the activities of

her grand-daughters to the *Kommandantur* underlines the danger of a lack of prudence even within the family.⁴⁸

Food riots staged by women were explicitly linked to family concerns. In the North of France, they were more successful in achieving their aims than strikes since they were perceived to be less of a threat to the German war effort.⁴⁹ Lynne Taylor emphasises the domestic motivations of the participants. Yet the discourse of the tract exemplified by Taylor, distributed in Seclin, March 1942 is condemning in tone and manifests an acute awareness of the effects of the German army's appropriation of French resources.⁵⁰

The reality of the detrimental effects of collaboration with Germany was a significant factor in the waning of Vichy hegemony. Appropriation of the country's resources went beyond the material to include manpower. The *relève* and *Service de Travail Obligatoire* (STO) provided a motivating factor for resistance as many young men took to the countryside to avoid work in Germany. The regionalism of Vichy and its policy of a *retour à la terre* was subverted as new links were forged between rural and urban areas. The increasing repression on the part of Vichy and the Germans during the latter years of *les années noires* illustrates the waning hegemony of the Occupation régimes. The sense of Patrie embodied by Vichy was reversed as optimism for a new democratic and republican tradition began to emerge. The demonstrations and symbolism on the *fêtes nationales* of July 14 and November 11 were noted for the display of republican symbols. On such days, the department of the Jura awoke to find that Tricolore flag had been hoisted or hung amongst allied flags from telephone lines.⁵¹ The proliferation of the *coq gaulois* on church towers and even as the brand of camembert cheese was another way in which support for a France free from Vichy and German repression could be manifested.⁵² Significantly, however, such acts signified not so much a return to the democratic values of the Third Republic as a progression towards a new form of democracy. One in which groups previously excluded from democratic politics would be able to participate. The discourse of revolution and liberation so prominent in the clandestine press consequently reflected a general desire for change and a new sense of Patrie.⁵³

Conclusion

The end of the Occupation was marked by the carivalesque atmosphere of the wave of liberations that swept through France in 1944. For some, this signified the closure to an experience that was so profound and unlike any other, but equally a beginning to a life that would continue to be shaped by the identities forged out of resisting. New identities were one manifestation of the creative drive that was necessary in both the creation, consolidation and continuation of the Resistance during *les années noires*. The Resistance was born from the many actions of a significant minority but also required the same level of ingenuity for its continued existence. *La vie inventée* was thus cardinal in the creation but also crucial to the efficacy of the struggle. For the exiled Spanish Republicans, resisting in France appeared to be a tantalising step towards the liberation of their own country from authoritarianism. For others, it was one more step in the long liberation.

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