Courage and its Costs in France

In the good old days of Hollywood cowboy movies the truth was always obvious, the good guys wore white hats, and the villains wore black ones. In the real world judgment of people and of their behavior is not that simple. A particular example of this is the differing versions of the behavior of French people that have been and are being expounded in the flood of books and commentaries about the Vichy regime and the occupation of France by Nazi Germany during World War II.

There has always been a kind of moral ambiguity about this. For almost thirty years there was deliberate official organized amnesia about the distressing fact of widespread collaboration of French people with the Nazis. Collective memory was, as the historian Pierre Nora suggested, used by groups to interpret the past. Specific dates and individuals are commemorated and may become familiar through political emphasis and cultural carriers of film, media, sand literature, while others may suffer from collective amnesia.

Few historians of World War II would agree with the assertion by General de Gaulle in his famous speech of August 25, 1944 on returning to the capital that "Paris liberated by itself, liberated by its people with the help of the French armies, with the support and help of all France…the only France, the real France." But everyone can appreciate both the importance for political unity in France of de Gaulle's remark, and his pride in those who risked death as members of the French Resistance.

In the rewriting of French history the intellectual amnesia about the thousands who collaborated in some way with the Vichy regime or with the German occupiers has been gradually dispelled. With it has been increasing attention to those

individuals and groups who played a heroic role, at personal or family cost, in confronting the Nazis, and who can be considered “righteous.”

The willingness to tell the truth about the mixed, disparate behavior of French people is a remarkable contrast, one of courage, the other of cowardice, to the refusal to acknowledge the truth in a German court. On trial in Germany in February 2016 is a 94 year-old man named Reinhold Hanning, a former SS sergeant guard at Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, who is charged with being an accessory to murder of more than 170,000 people at the camp between January 1943 and June 1944.

Hanning followed the pattern of the more famous SS officer, Adolf Eichmann. who was the Nazi “transportation minister,” the senior official, the fanatic Nazi organizing the task of deporting Jews to their death. There was no moral ambiguity in this case of sheer unrepentant evil. Though he once boasted he was no ordinary recipient of orders, at his trial in Jerusalem in 1961 for crimes against humanity, he pretended he was only a low level bureaucrat, a mere instrument, following orders.

The silence of a willing participant in the slaughter of Jews is in startling contrast to the long silence about the activity of many brave and heroic French individuals who fought in the Resistance against Nazi Germany. It is refreshing, and indeed inspiring if somewhat sad, to read the story, told in the context of history and personal memoir, of some of those resisters by Charles Kaiser in his book *The Cost of Courage*.

In sensitive fashion Kaiser relates the gripping story of an interrelate group, starting with the bravery of Andre Postel-Vinay who joined resistance groups in Paris from the beginning. It is a pleasure to see him honored, even more so because he is the father of the brilliant and intellectually brave French historian, Claire Andrieu.

Postel-Vinay convinced his friend Andre Boulloche to join the Resistance at the end of 1940. The latter, a member of the sophisticated and cultured Boulloche family, “social Catholics,” is the central figure in Kaiser’s book. For 60 years the family was silent and did not reveal publicly their heroism in the French Resistance during World War II. The three youngest members of the family, Andre Boulloche and two sisters, became resisters though other members of the family did not. Their father was deported to Ravensbruck camp and died there; their mother was arrested, water-boarded and sent to Buchenwald where she died; their older brother died at another camp, Ellrich.

This was the true cost of their courage, deaths of the non-resisters in the family because of the actions of the resisters. For the rest of his life, Andre suffered guilt about the deaths of his family while he survived.

After the Nazi occupation of Paris, Andre, a trained engineer, left for Algeria, returned to France, escaped from a Spanish prison, then went to join the Free French and General Charles de Gaulle in London. At age 28 he was parachuted into France, with 500,000 francs in cash and a cyanide pill, as de Gaulle’s personal military delegate in Paris to bring order to the Resistance movements in 11 departments of northern France. He was betrayed, captured by the Gestapo, shot in the stomach, tortured and water-boarded, and sent to Auschwitz, yet he survived three concentration camps.

In the deportation train on April 27,1944 to Auschwitz he was accompanied by 1,700 prisoners put in 17 cattle cars with an assortment of people including members of 64 different Resistance organizations.

Andre’s two sisters continued activity in the Resistance, and by luck survived. Both women, and also Andre, married after the war. Symbolically, one sister choose to to be married on June 18, 1947, the anniversary of de Gaulle’s famous speech

in London calling for a Free France.

After the war Andre became an official and then a politician, becoming Minister of Education under de Gaulle, then became a mayor, and a Socialist member of the National Assembly. It is gratifying to know that his legacy of service to his country had been continued by his great nephew, Francois Delattre, French Ambassador to the United Nations.

Among other things Andre called for reconciliation with Germany. The final irony was that died in a plane crash in the Black Forest of Germany.

The basis and objective of resisters varied: some were national patriots, lovers of country, some were ideologues wanting a better France, some wanted social justice, some wanted to save Jews, some were religious opponents of Nazism, some were youthful opponents of the existing system.

Of course, the complexity of French behavior existed from the start. Andre experienced this. When he and his friends left for North Africa in the belief that this was the best place to continue the battle against the Nazis, they were treated in Oran, Algeria as if they were traitors. French Jews, including youngsters, for a short time thought they could coexist with the Vichy regime and survive.

It is always difficult to sort out myth or falsehood from reality. This was particularly the case with France during the war. A defender of Vichy could argue that Petain did participate in the deportation of 76,000 Jews, but mostly only in the case of foreign Jews in order to save national French Jews. But in fact this myth was invented by Pierre Laval in his trial in 1945 and was promoted by French right wing nationalists.

One controversial, uncomfortable reminder of this is the case of Raymond Aubruc who was arrested by the Gestapo while in the company of Jean Moulin, usually held to be the leader of the

Resistance, and members of the Resistance group in June 1943. Surprisingly, he escaped from the Gestapo, supposedly with the aid of his wife. Consequently, there have been lingering doubts about whether Aubruc had betrayed Moulin.

President de Gaulle, speaking to the National Council of the Resistance, candidly told his audience, “You are the Resistance, but the Resistance is not the nation.” Kaiser’s book is a reminder that many thousands of French people did risk their lives and many died for the liberty and the liberation of France, and others bore the cost.