

# The truth behind the French Resistance myth

Nicholas Shakespeare reviews Robert Gildea's new book on the French Resistance in the [survey](#) of the French Resistance, the myth that the French freed themselves is largely poppycock, like de Gaulle's boast that only "a handful of scoundrels" behaved badly under four years of Nazi occupation. (One example: by October 1943, 85,000 French women had children fathered by Germans.) Most of the population didn't engage with their revolutionary past until the last moment, when the chief thing they recaptured was their pride. The first French soldier into Paris was part of a regiment "called 'la Nueve' because it was composed mainly of Spanish republicans".

The magnitude of the French defeat in June 1940, after a mere six weeks, compelled the writer Vercors (Jean Bruller), author of that celebrated novella of passive resistance, *The Silence of the Sea*, to predict that the Germans might stay on in France for a century. This being a very real possibility, it is not hard to see why the Resistance, in Gildea's estimation, "mobilised only a minority of French people. The vast majority learnt to muddle through under German Occupation and long admired Marshal Pétain." *Attentisme* – "wait and see" – was the most obeyed order of the day. It took until 1971 for a counter-narrative to surface, in the documentary *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, which suggested that the French, instead of behaving honourably under the Occupation, "had been supine, cowardly, and only too frequently given to collaboration".

It bears repeating that an astonishing one and a half million French soldiers remained POWs in Germany until 1945, putting pressure on political activists back home, notably communists, to form the opposition. But French Communist Party bosses, answerable to Moscow, "always

controlled an agenda that had little to do with the Resistance". One contemporary observer sneered: "The PCF led its resisters to the Rubicon – to go fishing."

Neutralised for the first two years of the war by the Nazi-Soviet pact, which made Hitler their ally, the French communists were led by Jacques Duclos, "who lived a quiet life disguised as a 'country doctor, 1900 style'". Meanwhile, their general secretary, Georges Marchais, worked in a German factory as a volunteer. Hardly models of heroism.

Not until Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941 did a more convincing resistance emerge, gaining pace with the Relève of June 1942, in which Vichy's chain-smoking Prime Minister, Pierre Laval, promised the release of one French POW for every three volunteers to work in Germany; the following February, the Service du Travail Obligatoire turned this into a compulsory order, directed at all men of military age. The result: up to 40,000 young men – the Resistance was 80% per cent composed of those under 30 – joined the maquis rather than go to Germany (although 650,000 did end up going). But as Gildea points out, the maquis were beset by problems – lack of weapons, training and leadership – which led to a succession of disastrous setbacks and reprisals. In Ruines, one person per house was shot in retaliation, including a child of seven. Gildea leaves the reader wondering, subversively, whether the outcome might have been radically different had the French shown no resistance at all until after the Free French Army landed in Provence on August 15, without taking part in the Normandy landings.

Gildea tells a story that will be less appealing to French audiences than earlier tellings. He provides an authoritative picture of "the breadth and diversity of resistance activity that developed in hidden corners of France". In his view, "the story of the French Resistance

is central to French identity". In contesting the Gaullist version, Gildea, author of a classic earlier text on the Occupation, *Marianne in Chains*, suggests that it may be more accurate "to talk less about French Resistance than about resistance in France".