

HISTORY

In the details

JULIAN WRIGHT

Philip Nord

FRANCE 1940
Defending the Republic
189pp. Yale University Press.
£18.99 (US \$27.50).
978 0 300 18987 2

David Drake

PARIS AT WAR
1939–1944
520pp. Belknap Press. £25 (US \$35).
978 0 674 50481 3

Robert Gildea

FIGHTERS IN THE SHADOWS
A new history of the French Resistance
593pp. Faber. £20.
978 0 571 28034 6

The French experience of the Second World War attracts attention for many good reasons. The military implosion of May and June 1940 seems at first sight exceptional, especially compared to the long stalemate of 1914–18. The political implosion that followed, as the Third Republic (led by a parliament with what was on paper a strong left-wing majority) committed constitutional suicide, feels shameful to anyone reading about it, whatever their national or political background. The strange twilight world of a Paris not reduced to rubble but left intact, run by competing German military and Gestapo leaders; and the tortured dance those men led with different shades of Vichyite politicians is grotesque and fascinating; the awful experience of the Jewish community, above all, demands to be retold from many different angles. The other twilight world of secret heroes who sought, for so many different reasons, to fight on against Hitler in clandestinity, is also attractive for its complexity and for the human stories that flow through that episode. Ultimately, however, the period demands our attention because it represents a great political, social and moral caesura in the life of a leading European nation. General de Gaulle sought to minimize the sense of change and emphasized

continuity, legal and constitutional. But, seventy years on, that very attempt not to think through the deep problems of a political and cultural time-shift at the Fall of France has led to a significant time-shift of its own – several generations have been needed to recover and rethink the real stories of this period.

Philip Nord's new book can be read in a few hours and can be recommended to students and others who need a quick but precise starting point for understanding 1940 in France. Nord makes comparisons to shake us out of a French-focused narrative that can be too teleological, without enough scepticism about the right-wing narratives of decline that were, after all, those of the brief victors in 1940. He ascribes the rise of Vichy as much to the unfortunate choices of the Prime Minister Paul Reynaud through a key cabinet reshuffle in the midst of the invasion crisis, appointing senior and junior ministers from a pool of anti-Republican politicians still furious with the Popular Front government of 1936. These men were a minority, but in the chaos of parliamentary discussions, under huge military stress in Bordeaux and then Vichy, the slippery Pierre Laval was able to twist and turn the debate to suit that very minority, and to pull off a remarkable personal coup in bullying and cajoling what had been a solidly republican and socialist-leaning parliament.

As for military defeat, some brave but mistaken decisions, and some weak and slightly sluggish decisions, on the part of an even smaller group of generals, were the cause of that. After all, Nord argues, if any other European state had been responsible for the defence of the Ardennes in 1940, would they have fared better? Nord surveys the evidence for how others would have coped, including the Russians and Germans, and concludes that there really was no systemic military or diplomatic problem in France that was not at least comparable to those experienced by other countries. He reminds us of the military boldness of Léon Blum, who in the face of stern opposition in his own party, accelerated the process of rearmament, only to be held up afterwards iniquitously by Vichy as the author of France's defeat. Ultimately, the French High Command



sent their best troops to the wrong place at the wrong time – and for apparently decent reasons. Then there was the audacious and in-subordinate German general, Heinz Guderian. Nord builds on Julian Jackson's *The Fall of France* (2002) with real European contextualization of France's defeat.

The upshot of these contingent decisions was pain and dislocation for millions of French people. David Drake writes a narrative of the capital during this period that, by catching the mood of those Parisians who wrote diaries and journals of the Occupation, restores a humane sense of reality to a story that can easily be reduced to one of derring-do (on the part of resisters) or cloak-and-dagger machinations (on the part of Laval, his enemies on the Right, and the German officials who alternately loathed and manipulated him). Built up on a deep engagement with the practical problems of living in Paris, as well as an elegant account of how Nazi authorities squabbled over its management, Drake's book is hugely readable and satisfyingly detailed. Few readers will be unfamiliar with the callous political calculation leading to the deportation of thousands of French Jews. But there is a baldness and straightforwardness to Drake's account of these crimes that somehow allows the reader to be shocked as though for the first time, on encountering the horrible conditions at Drancy; the cold brutality of Nazi or Vichy decisions regarding the population of Paris itself; and the thuggery of leading Nazis such as Hermann Goering, always convinced that his own profits from stolen Jewish artworks could be ten times higher. Drake's summary of how the different challenges to Nazi authority converged in Paris in August 1944, with the uncertainty over Allied policy towards liberating Paris and the huge pressure from left-wing resistance groups for a wider uprising, is also well judged.

In August 1944, as Allied troops fought to push the German forces back from Normandy, different groups across France thought the moment of national insurrection – whatever that might mean – had come. The impulse for armed uprising, targeting German soldiers flagrantly, was almost irresistible. But, even as they fell back in the face of the Allied armies, the Germans found time to exact punitive retaliation on such risings, with dreadful results. As Robert Gildea argues in *Fighters in the Shadows*, D-Day uncorked the bottle: resistance groups were inclined to go their own way and

pick their own fights, with catastrophic results. Gildea's book traces the complex and often unseen story that led so many different kinds of resisters to take these decisions in the summer of 1944. He sees the story as one of personal journeys that – if anything – were more promising and more organized in early 1943, when Jean Moulin had succeeded in marshalling some of the energies of rival groups, and when de Gaulle had not yet left London to build a government-in-waiting in Algiers.

The move to Algiers caused de Gaulle difficulties in the short term, but, for the resistance in metropolitan France, it marked deeper issues for the longer term. Part of the French Empire had developed a military tradition that supported the Free French; elsewhere, the reverse was true; and de Gaulle had to find a way of imposing himself on all these disparate elements. Transactions with, and sometimes decisive opposition to those who were only reluctant opponents of Vichy were vital, and after Jean Moulin's death in July 1943 de Gaulle never had as direct a connection to the radically different world of independent right-wing resisters or Communist groups in the North of France. Dealing with the right-wing rival claims of General Henri Giraud, just as likely at one point to have been supported by America, took over.

Those debates and experiences must ultimately have alienated de Gaulle from the metropolitan resistance. How dispiriting was the experience of many resistance fighters when, after the Liberation, they were slapped down by a de Gaulle eager to reimpose state authority, ensuring that the idea of a people's insurrection was rapidly stifled. In Paris, the Communist leader André Tolle was reminded of President Adolphe Thiers, who (in 1870) had "also insulted the Parisians", before sending French troops in to repress the Paris Commune. Women who had developed strong new identities through resistance activity suddenly found that there was no corollary, no continuation for these careers: active service in mainstream military units was not generally on offer. When some resistance leaders thought about what their movement had come to mean in its broader historical context, they looked back to the *levée en masse* – the general popular conscription that provided France's victorious revolutionary armies in the 1790s. Now they found professional officers from the Empire taking over. Soldiers who had fought under General Leclerc in Africa were unlikely to share much with left-leaning volunteers from

the metropolitan maquis. De Gaulle was icy and damning with the self-organized militias he had encouraged from afar between 1940 and 1944. FFI (Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur) officers in Toulouse were made to feel "desperately humiliated. They were not officers of the 'real' army. They had usurped their ranks".

With its deep concern for human failings, and for the suffering that came from bravery that was badly channelled or poorly rewarded, Gildea's book might have been dark and pessimistic. In fact it is vivid with real life and ordinary heroism. In this, what is an apparently straightforward aim – that Gildea felt it was high time to give resistance fighters their voice in the story – is in fact deeply important.

Gildea gently dissolves the uniquely French quality of the diverse movements involved, describing France as a space where diverse anti-Nazi individuals and groups could contribute to the demise of Hitler. These groups needed, to a varying extent, a leader, or a cogent goal, and Moulin's subtle political work on behalf of de Gaulle had begun to provide this. Léon Blum, the former Socialist Prime Minister, had given the shadowy Socialist remnant the same steer for de Gaulle in a sequence of carefully considered letters composed while in prison. But if the French resisters could hardly agree on a structure and framework for their collective activity, they did at least subscribe to one of a number of competing French narratives.

In this book, however, Gildea explains that the resistance in France involved more than French stories. Spanish republicans, Jewish Communists, Poles, Armenians, not to mention SOE were all involved, and the Jewish Communists seem to come through time and again in Gildea's narrative less as victims than as particularly important and dynamic fighters. It was de Gaulle himself who asked "Why have these Spaniards come to bother us, marching with the FFIs?", when Spanish Republicans paraded as part of Resistance celebrations in

Toulouse. This book gives the answer.

The relentless, persistent way in which Gildea gives voice to a kaleidoscope of men and women of different nationalities and races does more than any author before him to provide a convincingly complex and moving account of the ways in which people in France took up arms against the Vichy state and the Nazi occupation. This book cuts against the grain of classic narratives, not by setting out counter-narratives but by asking for our attention, for a page or two at a time, to listen to detail: the real-life detail of the frustrations, the suffering and heroism of people who exist at several removes from the grand shapers of history: Jews, monarchists, Protestant ministers, Catholic bishops, Communists, Socialists, women and men of many different social backgrounds. The leaders themselves are political, tetchy and hesitant – as human as any. We understand better the chancy combinations of family ties and the glimmers of heroic motivation in some republican or right-wing upbringing, that made up a movement of individuals and small groups.

Gildea considers the passing of the Resistance movement into reassimilation, the morose process of turning out of this strange moment in history into the new political and cultural life of the Fourth Republic. Drawn as they are to the intensity of this narrow window in French experience, both Robert Gildea and David Drake tell stories that remind us how dangerous and dislocating it was to live in the early 1940s in France. Making a life in that war could mean facing the threat of deportation or death. For the lucky ones to survive brutality, it meant understanding how one chooses actions that might, a few months hence, lose their public aura of heroism as regimes changed and the priorities of a new culture took over. Those choices and their often melancholy effects on people's lives are some of the most moving parts of this story: they live on today.