

Would You Have Had the Courage to Join the French Resistance?

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This is a paper about courage set within the context of the German Occupation of France during World War II. Although you will probably learn more about the Free French Resistance than you care to know, my goal is to answer four overriding questions:

- Are there different types of courage?
- Why did only 2% of the adult French population actively participate in the Resistance movement?
- What motivates the citizens of an occupied country to progress past survival, accommodation, collaboration, and to actively resist against an occupying force? And,
- To ask ourselves, "Would each of us have responded differently under similar circumstances?"

For me, the concept of courage recently became a point to ponder while standing on Omaha Beach in France, the landing site of American forces during the Normandy invasion on June 6, 1944. As I looked out across the English Channel I wondered what I would have done as my Higgins boat carried me toward Omaha Beach confronting German machine gun fire and mines. The distance between the drop off and the higher protective shoreline would have been between two and three hundred yards of open sand. As one who never served in the military I asked myself, "Would I have remained in the boat, jumped behind the nearest pylon, or moved quickly toward the German pillbox?" Quite frankly, I do not know. But I believe I would have moved forward to assist my fellow soldiers, tried hard to not act cowardly, and tried hard to simply survive. Other thoughts would have included this is what I had been trained to do and that someone must fight the evil of Nazi Germany. My respect for physical courage further increased as I walked through the nearby American and British cemeteries and read the names, home state, rank, and age of the dead soldiers. The humanity of each soldier became particularly real in the British cemetery in which each headstone included the name and age of the soldier (almost all under twenty-five) and a one hundred-thirty character eulogy written by the family.

Two examples include:

The bugle sounded
He answered the call
He nobly died for all

One in a million
Yes, but he is ours
And we love him so
One of the best

While standing on Omaha Beach, I also remembered that Plato noted that there are four cardinal virtues: wisdom, temperance, justice, and courage. Having pondered the four, I believe courage is the most important. Courage requires that one's actions rise above the expectations of normal behavior during moments of crisis. Others define courage as "moral courage", the type of courage demonstrated by Abraham Lincoln when confronting slavery during the Civil War. Then there is "physical courage", the type of courage demonstrated by our late Athenaeum member Peter Nicolos while flying three-hundred combat missions as an Air Force pilot in Viet Nam. Others note that courage is "instinctive." Such was the case as recently exhibited by the three Americans who thwarted a gunman's attack on a French train. When interviewed afterwards they stressed the unthinking nature of their actions. "It was just gut instinct," said one, "It wasn't really a conscious decision."

In contrast, can actions be identified as courageous when one does have time to think about the personal danger involved? This aspect of courage occurred to me while reading the war memorials in each French village square commemorating the soldiers who died in World War I and II. When examined more closely the monuments always listed significantly more soldiers who died during World War I. What happened, why the difference? Were there no French heroes during World War II? Why do some moments of crisis lead to courageous acts and some do not? Did such a small number of French citizens join the Resistance because they had 1,500 days to think about the German Occupation? Paraphrasing Barkley's famous philosophical observation, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, where are they?" In the big picture, is courage instinctive or rational? From Plato's perspective, is one type of courage preferable over the other?

Most likely, most American's knowledge of the French response to the German Occupation is reminiscence of the joke involving the sale of an Italian military gun, "Inexpensive, never fired, dropped once." Or, somewhat condescendingly, what military resistance, the United States and Britain liberated France during World War II while the French watched from second story windows. But not all French citizens did watch from the sidelines, approximately two-percent joined the French Resistance, knowingly facing torture, death, and harm to their family and village if caught. The German Occupation

forced each village to confront related questions as well: What is the appropriate response by local citizens? How does one interpret the actions of one's neighbors during a foreign occupation? Who has the authority to decide which actions are appropriate and the consequences? These are all tough questions and unknown to most Americans. Except for the British occupation of a few Northeastern cities during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Columbus, New Mexico by Poncho Villa in 1916, and by the Japanese of a few Aleutian Islands during World War II, a foreign country has never occupied the United States. To the best of my knowledge, Hopkinsville has only been "occupied" by Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War and by the Nightriders on December 7, 1907. Thankfully, Hopkinsville has never had to seriously confront the permanent occupation of a foreign force as experienced by the French during World War II.

From an historical perspective, the most startling fact that I learned while researching this paper is that France surrendered to Germany without any significant resistance when the Germans drove into Paris on June 14, 1940. During the preceding year, France and England had declared war on Germany in September 1939, the Germans had bypassed the Maginot Line, Prime Minister Reynaud informed Churchill on May 15 that "We've lost the battle", Allied troops escaped to England at Dunkirk on June 4, the French government declared Paris an "Open City" on June 10, France signed the Armistice on June 25, and Hitler flew to Paris for a one day visit on June 28, 1940. (As further humiliation, Hitler pointedly signed the Armistice in the same French railcar that Germany had surrendered in during 1918.) Simply put, the French government "sued for peace" (surrendered) with the hope that the Germans would not destroy their cities and countryside, as was the case in Poland, Belgium, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Czechoslovakia, Holland, and Luxembourg. Immediately, over 2,000,000 French soldiers became prisoners of war and were quickly transported to work in German factories and farms. Most French soldiers would not return home until 1944 or 1945. In addition, hundreds of thousands of French civilians were soon requisitioned and transferred to Germany for compulsory labor to perform similar work. Labor shortages, particularly on French farms, soon plagued the French economy.

Had we lived in France during the German Occupation our daily lives would have been impacted in the following ways:

- During early 1940, an exodus of over 4,000,000 French citizens tried to escape the Nazi onslaught traveling any way possible from northeastern to southwest France. Confusion reigned in every French city and village: who was in charge,

what information was correct, should citizens fight, hide, or leave? The chaos and uncertainty is clear in this contemporary account:

“The luckiest ones had wheelbarrows, a pram, a cart made of four planks of wood set on top of crudely fashioned wheels, bowing down under the weight of bags, tattered clothes, sleeping children . . . None of them knew why they were bothering to flee: all of France was burning; there was danger everywhere . . . ”

- Germany quickly divided France geographically into the Occupied and Free Zones. For strategic reasons the Occupied Zone included France’s northern coal, iron, and ore mines, industrial centers, and western coastline. Travel between zones was quickly restricted and required special passes approved by the German military or the recently created Vichy government.
- One of the conditions of the armistice was that the French had to pay for their own occupation. The French were required to cover the cost associated with the upkeep of the 300,000 German soldiers stationed in France. This burden amounted to over \$20,000,000 German reichsmarks or \$400,000,000 French francs per day.
- Unemployment was high as the French economy had yet to fully recover from the Great Depression. Since World War I the French government had been unable to achieve any consensus on key issues. Which political party spoke for the majority of the French people, the Nationalists, Communists, Socialists, Petainists, or Monarchists?
- France’s prior political and military leadership ceased to exist. The Third Republic quickly voted itself out of existence and politicians sympathetic to the Germans joined the Vichy government. The eighty-four year old Petain surrendered by informing France, “It is with anguish that I tell you that we must lay down our arms.” In contrast, Churchill made five dangerous trips to France pleading with the French to not give in to the Nazi Blitzkrieg. Churchill contrastingly responded:

“Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island,

whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender . . . “

As one French minister of state declared before declining Churchill's offer to form an "indissoluble" Franco-British union, "Better to be a Nazi province. At least we know what that means." Most Frenchmen also believed that England would soon surrender and their daily routine would soon return.

- The majority of French citizens simply lacked the will to fight another war. Remember that France and Germany had recently fought World War I on French soil in which 73% of the French military had been killed or injured. (In contrast, only 7% of America's military were killed or injured during World War I.)
- As the War progressed, most French citizens eventually realized that the Occupation was permanent: As one contemporary noted in 1943:

"The Parisian now knows the condition of being "occupied" in a city that does not belong to him anymore and that offers him the schizophrenic image of an environment suddenly foreign to his gaze. Constraints and humiliations, restrictions and punishments accompany this disorientation and the upending of daily routine."
- Initially, the occupying Germans appeared well mannered and the country's basic services were efficiently operated. To paraphrase Mussolini's success in Italy, "... the trains ran on time." The arrival of the German army arriving in one French village was described in this manner:

"The men seemed very young. They had rosy complexions and golden hair. They rode magnificent, well-fed horses with wide, shiny rumps, which they tied up in the square, around the War Memorial. The soldiers broke ranks and started to make themselves at home. The village was filled with the sound of boots, foreign voices, the rattling of spurs and weapons. In the better houses, they hid away the linen."
- The Nazis utilized the local police force to legitimize arrests, intimidate, or deport civilians to work, concentration, or death camps. I venture to say that most of the people in this room would have been arrested and transported to Germany during the first months of the German Occupation. At least initially, most Frenchmen

failed to understand the different objectives of the typical German soldier and that of the SS and Gestapo.

- Adjusted to the rationing of food, gas, coal and electricity. There were many instances of malnourishment to children, the disabled, and the elderly. Same with gasoline, walking and bicycles soon became the primary means of transportation.
- Adjusted to the mandate that all Jews were excluded from the army and certain professions. This mandate was particularly difficult to understand by the Jewish veterans who had bravely fought for France during World War I.
- Adjusted to the German military declaring all leading restaurants, cafes, bars, movie theatres, and brothels were off-limits to most Frenchmen. Curfews usually ran from 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m.
- If wealthy, and particularly if Jewish, adjusted to the loss of one's home and personal belongings. As one English diarist recorded:

“No time was lost by the Germans before occupying the luxurious homes of the wealthy Jews . . . Huge (moving vans) were soon seen stationed before their houses . . . Beautiful tapestries, carpets, busts, masterpieces, china, furniture, blankets, sheets, all were taken away to Germany.”

Given the permanent change in lifestyle, many French citizens responded in the following ways:

- If wealthy, attempt to escape with one's family to one's country house or pay a bribe for a travel visa to Portugal or Spain.
- If one were male, healthy, and between the ages of 18-43, attempt to avoid conscription by fleeing to the countryside. After 1942 well-connected French men willingly volunteered to perform hard labor in French coal mines than work in a German munitions factory. Regrettably, many Frenchmen were later killed when American bombers targeted factories in Germany.
- If one possessed a skill, e.g. an engineer, work with a French company operating in France, even if it benefitted the Germans. Or if one were a civil servant, continue to work with the many German civilians sent to maintain civil authority in France.

- Decide what level of support to provide to one's Jewish friends and neighbors. Did one continue to support shops once they had a yellow star in the window indicating that the store was Jewish owned? Did one support the same shops once a red star was placed in the window indicating that an "Aryan manager" was now in charge?
- Decide whether to assist the approximately 30,000 black American soldiers who had elected to remain in France after World War I? The Nazis singled out such individuals even more so than those identified as Jews. Unfortunately, most French black expatriates that were transported to Germany did not return.
- Decide what level of anger to express when in contact with German soldiers. Such actions might include whistling patriotic songs, stony stares, posting flyers on lampposts, dropping anti-Nazi propaganda from rooftops, or listening to the BBC. For those with access to a mimeograph machine, newsletters could be written and distributed in public places. Proving the French kept their sense of humor during the Occupation, one mimeographed "tip" included the following:

"They are conquerors. Be polite to them. . . . {But} if he asks you for a light, offer your cigarette. Never in human history has one refused a light, even to the most traditional enemy . . ."
- Decide whether to socialize or become friends with German authorities to improve one's business, lifestyle, or pleasure. Famous people who remained in Paris included Picasso, Josephine Baker, Sartre, and CoCo Chanel. By default, some businesses benefitted from the German Occupation: entertainment, food, clothing, banks, cinemas, fashion, and even horse racing. And if one financially prospered during the Occupation, how did one help others? Too much prosperity led to the jealousy of others and the danger of being reported to the Germans for profiteering. How did one learn to look like everyone else and to become invisible?
- When purchasing life's daily necessities, learn what could be purchased on the black market, which stores offered the best products, and how to best utilize family members to stand in multiple lines when new items became available.
- Accept the fact that one no longer had a private life as one's phones could be tapped, every neighbor could be an informer, and one's landlord could provide the Germans access to one's home at any time. Fearing discovery, should one write a

journal to record life in Occupied France? As indicated in the following denunciation letter, the Germans encouraged informers:

“To: Commissioner of Jewish Questions; Paris, 1/28/1943

Monsieur le Commissaire:

I am the concierge at 4 Rue Saalbier, Paris arrondissement; my owner is a Jew, and I must declare to you that in the building there is an active synagogue. The owner's name is Lucien Feist and he has left for the Free Zone.

My deepest respects, Renee Berti

- If a female, given the already existing shortage of French men, decide whether to socialize with German soldiers and the likely possibility of sexual relations. The children of such relationships were known as “little Fritzes.”

Given the challenges of learning how to live with the unknown, the malnourishment, the lack of heat, the changing regulations, the curfews, and one's suspicious neighbors, daily life became an overwhelming struggle. Hopefully, we can now better appreciate that life in an occupied country is complicated and more difficult than initially imagined. Understandably, the daily goal of most French citizens was to simply survive, not act courageously. As British Prime Minister Anthony Eden stated following the war, “If one hasn't been through the horror of an occupation by a foreign power, you have no right to pronounce upon what a country does which has been through all that.”

And yet, particularly after 1943, the number of individuals resisting the Germans became more prevalent and active. Partisan activity increased due to the certainty of an American/British/Canadian invasion, revenge, pride, and to achieve some control over their lives. As one partisan observed, “For us, the Resistance was a kind of lifesaver—because without it, life no longer had any meaning.” A further motivation was the realization that their neighbors were being transported using local trains to concentration or death camps. The reality of such inhumanity was made clear to me while reading the inscription on this memorial near the train station in Angouleme, France. The memorial commemorates the over 6,000 Jewish children boarded at that train station to German death camps. Sadly, few if any of the 6,000 children ever returned to Angouleme.

Particularly after 1943, resistance changed from individual acts of minor disobedience to aggressive acts utilizing small groups. The active partisans primarily involved men and women representing four broad groups: the "lower middle" economic class, university professors and students, the entire working class, and a large majority of peasants. Not surprisingly, Jews were over-represented at all levels of the French Resistance. Studies show that although Jews in France constituted only 1% of the French population they comprised 15%-20% of the Resistance. Partisan acts included stockpiling arms, blowing up railroad stations, cutting lines of communication, troop deployment reports, disruption of convoys, and the assassination of German officers. In northern France, coal miners went on strike, slowing down the transportation of coal needed in Germany. Life in the Resistance was dangerous: one had to vary where one spent each night and whether to trust one's co-workers and friends. It is estimated that the average lifespan of an active French partisan was between one and one and a half years. The estimated life expectancy of a radio operator was around six months. If caught, each partisan knew that unless he could immediately take his cyanide pill he would be tortured, sent to Germany, or most likely killed. For many, death meant being hanged on a lamppost in his village to discourage others from joining the Resistance. Some partisans were beheaded by guillotine. Equally as troubling, partisans knew that their actions would lead to the killing of ten or more local villagers for every German killed or injured. In some situations the Germans ruthlessly killed entire villages (including men, women and children) in retaliation for any type of civil disobedience. It is estimated that 30,000 French civilian hostages were shot to intimidate others. Each mission involved tough ethical dilemmas: did one blow up the local train station or the train station three villages over? Which village's citizens would be killed in retaliation? Such was the case in Tulle in which 100 men were seized at random and massacred three days after the Normandy invasion. This was also the case in the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, where 642 citizens were killed. The Germans shot the men and after locking the women and children in the village church burned the church to the ground.

Daily life for a partisan was not easy: one lived primitively in the woods with perhaps twenty new acquaintances, went hungry and often without fresh water, and faced German tanks with only a gun or hand grenade. Quickly, each partisan learned to shoot a gun, kill, elect a group leader, follow that leader, learn which farmers could be trusted, identify the best places to hide in the countryside, decide which locations should be attacked, and decide if informers should be killed (even if they had been a friend before the Occupation). Most important, a partisan had to quickly demonstrate that he or she could be trusted in battle.

In addition to the physical danger, life as a partisan forced one to think creatively. One learned to steal dynamite from the Germans rather than to handcraft explosives. If injured or needed medicine, one sought out a veterinarian rather than a physician. If one had to travel at night farther than could be expected on a bicycle, one learned to travel with the local fishmonger. The German officers liked their fresh fish and a vehicle traveling at night could be more easily explained. A smelly fish cart would also hide the presence of an American pilot being secretly escorted to England. Local farmers learned to keep all their cows in a particular corner of a field. Buried underneath the dozing cows were the guns and radio equipment dropped off by the British the night before. Particularly in the months before the Normandy invasion, the Resistance used mobile radio equipment to provide and receive key military intelligence from the British. (Does anyone know the significance of da-da-da-Da?)

In retrospect, the greatest benefit the Resistance provided was to force the German military to maintain a large number of German troops and equipment away from the Normandy coast. As General Eisenhower wrote in his military memoir following World War II:

“Throughout France, the Free French had been of inestimable value in the campaign. They were particularly active in Brittany, but on every portion of the front we secured help from them in a multitude of ways. Without their great assistance, the liberation of France and the defeat of the enemy in Western Europe would have continued a much longer time and meant greater losses to ourselves.”

Not surprisingly, the legacy that France surrendered without a fight and that only a small number of citizens actively resisted has been difficult for the French to resolve. Despite Charles De Gaulle's statements to the contrary, France soon realized that it was the Americans, British and Canadians that liberated France. In an attempt to save face, after the liberation many French villagers “courageously” shaved the hair off women who had supposedly slept with German soldiers. Others tried to distance themselves from their involvement with the Vichy government, portraying themselves as quiet members of the French resistance. Several future French political leaders, including Prime Minister Francois Mitterrand, attempted this strategy. Some French partisans who actively resisted, such as Andre, Christine and Jacqueline Boulloche, preferred to not talk about their participation until the 1960-80's. And only then to questioning family members or historians researching the history of the Resistance movement.

In closing, if courage is defined as instinctive action then I am confident that each of us would have stormed Normandy Beach. If courage is defined as rational thought then let

us suspend judgment for the 90% of French citizens who simply tried to survive. Are we 100% certain that we would have acted differently? This is the historian's greatest challenge: how does history accurately evaluate prior actions from the perspective of an armchair philosopher? When we are always the saint and never the sinner. Hopefully, each of us now better appreciates courageous individuals. One never knows who will step forward during moments of crisis. At least in my opinion, courage is the most important of Plato's four cardinal virtues. Simply stated, courage is the keyway that drives idle intellectual thought into the actions that make our world a better place to live in which to live.