

The metropolitan French Resistance: Hindrance to the German war effort?

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When asked about the impact of French Resistance, Albert Speer replied “What French Resistance?”¹ Eisenhower, meanwhile, maintained that resistance efforts were worth 15 regular divisions, and shortened the campaign in France by two months.² Both, in fact, are right, because they are referring to different periods of the war. Based roughly on Foot's typology,³ eight pertinent activities of the Resistance can be identified, though the distinctions between them are of course sometimes blurred. These are: (i) intelligence, (ii) deception, (iii) escape and evasion, (iv) direct action (attacks, assassinations and battles), (v) sabotage, (vi) passive and administrative resistance, (vii) propaganda and (viii) tying down troops. An examination of these eight activities will show that although there were a number of valuable successes, Resistance accomplished little for most of the war, but the accomplishments of a few months of 1944 were so important that they constitute a significant hindrance to the German war effort. All the same, the greatest achievements of Resistance were not in destroying Germany, but rather in rebuilding France.

Intelligence, in fact, was one of the areas in which the Resistance was most successful. Although not on the scale of Ultra, important and valuable work was done by a proliferation of agents. Particularly spectacular was the delivery of a complete plan of the Atlantic Wall to London, before a brick had been laid.⁴ Another area of impressive achievement was the aid provided by Gustave Bertrand in cracking Ultra, although it should be noted that his most crucial contribution was not his own work, but rather to act as a conduit for the Polish success in breaking the codes.⁵ More prosaically, a fair amount of useful meteorological intelligence was sent on to Bomber Command,⁶ and Resistance reports were important in the planning of Operation Crossbow, to destroy the V-2 launching sites (even though the operation itself was largely ineffective).⁷ Simple reporting of troop movements played a part in helping the Allies build up an accurate order of battle.⁸ In 1944, Colonel Passy's network was

¹ Foot, M.R.D. (1976), *Resistance* (London: Methuen), p. 313

² Calvocoressi, Peter; Wint, Guy; & Pritchard, John (1999), *The Penguin History of the Second World War*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin), p. 342

³ Foot, M.R.D. (1976), *Resistance* (London: Methuen), p. 10

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁷ Heaton, Colin (2001), *German Anti-Partisan Warfare in Europe, 1939-1945* (Atglen PA: Schiffer), p. 50

⁸ Foot (1976), pp. 24-25. So effective was this intelligence gathering that at the end of the war, the Germans gave themselves up by the Allied version of the order of battle, because it was so much more accurate than their own. *Ibid.*, p. 307

receiving some 1000 telegrams a day, and 2000 plans a week.⁹ Certainly these were all useful successes, even if they do rather pale into insignificance when set against Ultra, so far did signals intelligence outstrip the work of even the best placed spy.¹⁰

In deception, by contrast, there was surprisingly little activity. Whereas Greek and Yugoslav resistance missions were key in diverting Hitler's attention away from Sicily,¹¹ there is no comparable operation in France. There was some attempt to divert troops to South-West France in October 1943,¹² but by and large, the role of Resistance was in providing feedback, not in direct deception. Just about their only direct function was in unwittingly spreading 'sibs', demoralising anecdotes invented by SOE.¹³ Significantly, many Allied commanders did not trust Resistance enough to allow them to take part in Fortitude,¹⁴ and when Resistance was involved, it was only one of many channels used.¹⁵ "Resistance provided some of the stage settings and a few walk on parts; but the stars, and the directors, for the dramas of deception belonged elsewhere."¹⁶ Without Allied trust, the Resistance was not in a position to hinder the Germans through deception.

Facilitating escape and evasion was another area in which the French excelled. Indeed, they were in this respect more effective than any of the other European resistance movements.¹⁷ Unfortunately, even the best could not achieve enough to change the course of the war. The combined efforts of Dutch, Belgian and French Resistance helped some 7000 expensively trained airmen to either escape or evade capture altogether, most of them crossing the Pyrenees into Spain. Resisters became incredibly skilful at finding hiding places in both town and countryside.¹⁸ In eight operations in Brittany in the first half of 1944, the Shelburne network rescued 143 people.¹⁹ Remarkably, by summer 1944 a downed airman had a roughly 50-50 chance of getting home unscathed.²⁰ There is a certain amount of evidence that the Gestapo infiltrated escape lines, and gained intelligence from grateful airmen,²¹ but this was one of the areas in which the Resistance was most effective. Efficiency, though, is not the same as achievement. The USAAF numbered 2,411,294 in March 1944,²² and Bomber Command was still operating after losses of 66,305;²³ 7000 men was certainly not a war-winning figure.

In the field of direct action – attacks, assassinations and battles – by contrast, the contribution of the Resistance was, for most of the war, "puny",²⁴ rarely posing a

⁹ Wiewiorka, Olivier (2000), 'France' in Bob Moore, ed., *Resistance in Western Europe* (Oxford: Berg), p. 135

¹⁰ Foot (1976), p. 308

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 311

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹³ Foot (1976), p. 30

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁵ Beevor, J.G. (1981), *SOE: Recollections and Reflections 1940-1945* (London: Bodley Head), p.233

¹⁶ Foot (1976), pp. 30-31

¹⁷ Heaton, Colin (2001), *German Anti-Partisan Warfare in Europe, 1939-1945* (Atglen PA: Schiffer), p. 49

¹⁸ Kedward, H.R. (1993), *In Search of the Maquis* (Oxford: Clarendon), p. 8

¹⁹ Wiewiorka (2000), p. 135

²⁰ Foot (1976), p. 311

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 312

²² Craven, W.F. & Cate, J.L. (1958), *The Army Air Forces in World War II, Volume VII: Services Around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. xlii

²³ Webster, Sir Charles & Frankland, Noble (1961), *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany 1939-1945*, Vol. III: Victory (London: HMSO), pp. 286-287

²⁴ Foot (1976), p. 319

genuine military threat to the Germans.²⁵ Guerrilla forces are only really effective in support of regular troops anyway,²⁶ and it is telling that whenever the Maquis faced a determined force in battle, they were easily defeated. At Vercors, for instance, despite receiving weapons, supplies and support from elite troops, the assembled Maquis were quickly wiped out.²⁷ It was battles such as this which Hitler was referring to when he happily announced that “the partisan war has the advantage of eliminating all those who oppose National Socialism.”²⁸ As for assassinations, although they had a certain moral effect, there was always someone else to take the job; no doubt the assassination of Ritter was very satisfying, but it did not bring an end to the STO.²⁹ The removal of Admiral Darlan, with his doubtful loyalties, was perhaps a little more important, because of the risk that he would use the French Mediterranean fleet to thwart Operation Torch, but in the same way, there was always a chance that his successor would do the same.³⁰ Towards the end of the war, however, guerrilla attacks on troops began to do genuine damage, if only by dint of their frequency. Von Runstedt recorded:

“From January 1944, the state of affairs in Southern France became so dangerous that all commanders reported a general revolt...Cases became numerous where whole formations of troops, and escorting troops of the military commanders were surrounded by bands for many days and, in isolated locations, simply killed off...The life of the German troops in southern France was seriously menaced and became a doubtful proposition.”³¹

In support of D-day, again, there was much activity, some of it very effective. Foot goes into some detail on the famous case of 11 men holding up the march of a thousand,³² and Michel estimates that the constant ambushes held 2 divisions away from the Normandy beaches on the 6th and 7th of June.³³ To summarise, direct action was in general ineffective, with the exception of some operations in the first half of 1944, but these operations, though few in number, were extremely important in effect.

Sabotage, however, was an area in which Resistance was astonishingly ineffective. It was “the best and least expensive method of striking at the enemy which was within its [the Resistance’s] capabilities”³⁴, and France was an area of huge importance to Germany, contributing some 1,151,056.4 million Francs worth of goods and services to the German economy, equivalent to a quarter of the German GNP.³⁵ Systematic sabotage could therefore have made a real difference to the war,

²⁵ Wiewiorka (2000), p. 125

²⁶ Beevor (1981), p. 231

²⁷ Keegan, John (1989), *The Second World War* (London: Pimlico), p. 406

²⁸ Michel, Henri (1972), *The Shadow War* (London: Andre Deutsch), p. 287

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222

³⁰ Heaton, Colin (2001), *German Anti-Partisan Warfare in Europe, 1939-1945* (Atglen PA: Schiffer), p. 35

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53

³² Foot (1966), *SOE in France* (London: HMSO), pp. 395-396

³³ Michel (1972), p. 290

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217

³⁵ Milward, Alan S. (1970), *The New Order and the French Economy* (Oxford: Clarendon), pp. 276-277

yet for the first two years of occupation, sabotage was barely a factor.³⁶ The almost complete incapacitation of the crucial tungsten mines at Puy les Vignes, the only piece of sabotage which can be ranked alongside the Rjukan raids in Norway, came too late to have any great effect on the war.³⁷ Equally late in the day was the impressive raid on the Jupiter factories at Brest: 400,000 litres of submarine fuel must have made quite a bang, but the Battle of the Atlantic had been won for almost a year by this point.³⁸ Some damage was done to communications, which was no doubt highly annoying, but anything crucial could be sent by courier or on military frequencies, and it took a skilled engineer to put a telephone line out of action for more than a few hours.³⁹ A fair amount of damage was also done to the transport network in June 1944, but the fame of spectacular incidents like the destruction of 52 locomotives at Bellegarde serves to demonstrate their rarity.⁴⁰ Just 150 sabotage attacks were carried out, and of those just 35 stopped production for more than a month,⁴¹ and the overall effect was that of a “pinprick”.⁴² Not until June 1944 (too late for industrial sabotage to count for much) did these activities become a major factor, when the rail network came under systematic and effective attack.

Passive and administrative resistance may only be a negative, defensive tactic, lacking the glamour of the saboteur or the *maquisard*,⁴³ but it is also an area with huge potential. It does not destroy the enemy, but the cumulative effect of a thousand tiny actions can genuinely hinder him. Results were mixed, although generally positive. Taking advantage of the Nazi’s lack of technical and local expertise,⁴⁴ go-slows were common, and productivity plummeted. Coal productivity in France fell 39% between 1938 and 1944.⁴⁵ Output per employee of Bauxite at the end of 1943 was half what it had been in 1939.⁴⁶ In June 1942, it took quadruple the working hours to manufacture a Fieseler-Storch aeroplane at the Moraine Saulnier works as it would have done in Germany.⁴⁷ Admittedly, not all of this can be ascribed to Resistance; inexperienced labourers and deterioration of equipment were both important factors.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the Germans themselves concluded that go-slows and non-cooperation on the railways did more damage than either bombing or sabotage;⁴⁹ railway traffic dropped by 37% in April 1944.⁵⁰ Many *gendarmes*, too, passively aided resisters,⁵¹ often warning of impending searches, showing leniency in arresting demonstrators, and not checking papers properly (especially on the Pyrenees escape line).⁵² All these small actions added up to a valuable success in the fight against the Nazis, but given

³⁶ Kedward (1985), *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance 1940-1944* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 46

³⁷ Milward (1970), pp. 251-253

³⁸ Wieviorka (2000), p. 135

³⁹ Foot (1976), p. 48

⁴⁰ Foot (1976), p. 329

⁴¹ Foot (1966), pp. 505-517

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 314

⁴³ Michel (1972), 204

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197

⁴⁵ Milward (1970), p. 288

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t129.e1370&authstatuscode=202> on 19 February 2008

⁵⁰ Wieviorka (2000), p. 35

⁵¹ Kedward (1993), pp. 58-59

⁵² Michel (1972), p. 199

the potential of this tactic, still more could – and should – have been done. In a pre-computer age, clerks were in an ideal position to mix up card-indexes, resulting in hours of bureaucratic impotence,⁵³ but in fact the majority of civil servants did their work correctly “out of discipline, conviction, ignorance or fear.”⁵⁴ Similarly, apart from a few impressive examples, railway clerks do not seem to have thoroughly exploited the opportunity to mix up cargo labels, thereby sending the wrong sealed carriages all over Europe.⁵⁵ Despite the thoroughness of Communist preparations and doctrine,⁵⁶ strikes did not really get under way until the Summer of 1944, too late to have much effect when these factories were a month or two from liberation anyway.⁵⁷ It is impossible to measure the precise effects of passive resistance,⁵⁸ but it certainly seems to be an area in which opportunities were missed.

Propaganda was not an area which damaged the German war effort directly, but its key role in building support for Resistance allowed many activities to be carried out. This was important, because Resistance only works if the resisters believe it can, and therefore is “in the first instance, the child of...propaganda.”⁵⁹ It was certainly a child with active parents: despite the difficulties in obtaining paper and ink,⁶⁰ anti-Nazi literature was one of the first manifestations of Resistance, appearing from remarkably early on,⁶¹ and by 1944 there were over a thousand clandestine newspapers in France. One newspaper, ‘*Defense de la France*’, produced up to 450,000 copies per print run.⁶² Meanwhile, posters advertising *La Relève* were almost universally defaced.⁶³ These efforts helped foster such anti-Nazi sentiment that by 1944 a resister could expect to be sheltered by 90% of the population,⁶⁴ and the Communists estimated that propaganda exploiting martyrdoms resulted in 50 new recruits for each man lost.⁶⁵ The precise role of propaganda can never be calculated, but certainly played an important part in transforming Resistance from isolated acts into a national clandestine movement, both in reality and, equally importantly, in perception. It did not, though, have any significant direct effect on the German war effort.

The secondary objective of all Resistance activity was to tie down troops. Ascertaining just how many troops were tasked to internal security is well-nigh impossible; estimates vary from Heaton’s 20 divisions, or 300,000 men⁶⁶ to Keegan’s assertion that German security forces in France never exceeded 6500 and German army divisions took no part in anti-Resistance activity.⁶⁷ There are a couple of examples of significant army commitments: the 157th *Alpen* division, the most experienced counter-insurgency unit in the Wehrmacht, had to be redeployed from the Caucasus to the South of France. They, along with 12,000 Vichy police and infantry

⁵³ Foot (1976), p. 44

⁵⁴ Michel (1972), p. 203

⁵⁵ de Vomécourt, Phillipe (1961), *Who Lived to See the Day* (London: Hutchinson), pp. 33-35

⁵⁶ Wieviorka (2000), 132

⁵⁷ Michel (1972), 225-227

⁵⁸ Michel (1972), 357

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 269

⁶⁰ Wieviorka (2000), 129

⁶¹ Heaton (2001), 41

⁶² Foot (1976), 60

⁶³ Kedward (1993), 8

⁶⁴ Foot (1976), 61

⁶⁵ Michel (1972), 218

⁶⁶ Heaton (2001), 33. He includes in this figure 10 divisions of Vichy police.

⁶⁷ Keegan (1989), 411

and He-111 bombers, were required to wipe out 465 Maquisards in the battle of the Plateau of Glieries.⁶⁸ In some areas, railway tracks had to be patrolled day and night,⁶⁹ and many troops were required to guard against sabotage.⁷⁰ Although nothing like the commitment to guarding supply lines on the Eastern Front,⁷¹ significant numbers of troops carried out internal security taskings in France. The problem is that most of them would have been stationed to France anyway. Despite Hitler's obsession with Norway, France was always the most likely point of Allied invasion, and the vast majority of these troops were there to defend the Atlantic wall. They carried out internal security operations because they were there, and had no other more pressing mission. Mostly, as Keegan implies, it was the Gestapo who dealt with the Resistance, and Resistance efforts to tie down and disperse German troops were largely a failure.

For most of the war, the effects of Resistance on the German war effort were nowhere near as great as has been claimed. It did not live up to the romantic visions of Churchill,⁷² and "where organized military operations were concerned", Heaton writes, it was a "basically ineffective rabble for most of the war....causing the Germans little legitimate concern."⁷³ If Speer is to be believed, Resistance caused the Germans little actual concern, either. From 1940 to 1944, the Resistance did not even achieve the relatively modest ambitions of the Joint Planning Staff: German morale was not significantly lowered, and units continued to operate in the West without interruption.⁷⁴

So why not? For the majority of the war, the achievements of the French Resistance were incomparably smaller than those of the Partisans in the East, in Yugoslavia and around the Pripet marshes, who forced the Germans to fight a full-scale counter-insurgency behind their own lines, tying down, in one estimate, 55 Axis divisions.⁷⁵ The most significant limiting factors were not those over which the Resistance had any control. One was geography: France is, broadly speaking, mostly rural and cultivated, and there are few wildernesses to which the aspiring Maquisard might retreat. A second key factor was the security services. The Gestapo fully lived up to their reputation for brutal efficiency,⁷⁶ and their allies in the *Milice Francaise* brought equal zeal and, most dangerously of all, knowledge of accents, customs and faces.⁷⁷ German security operations against Resistance radio operators were particularly effective, and 75% of the so-called 'pianists' were rounded up in 1941 and 1942.⁷⁸ Vicious reprisals and exemplary punishments followed every Resistance action, dissuading many.⁷⁹ The history of the Nazi party helped here, too; many of its members were former subversives and outlaws themselves, and knew what to look for.⁸⁰ A third factor was a constant lack of resources. Resistance movements in the Balkans and Mediterranean were higher priority, and there were never enough

⁶⁸ Heaton (2001), 52

⁶⁹ Foot (1976), 47

⁷⁰ F/D 3040/49, Section IV, Sc.425, 'Schutz gegen Sabotage', in Milward (1970), 154

⁷¹ Heaton (2001), 8

⁷² Stafford (1980), 207

⁷³ Heaton (2001), 42

⁷⁴ 'The Distant Future', extract from the Joint Planning Staff's Review of Future Strategy, 14 June 1941, JP(41)444 in CAB 79/12, in Stafford (1980), 234

⁷⁵ Beevor (1981), 232

⁷⁶ Michel (1972), 258-60

⁷⁷ Foot (1976), 237

⁷⁸ Wieviorka (2000), 130

⁷⁹ Michel (1972), 203

⁸⁰ Foot (1976), 63

weapons to go around, and most crucially of all, never enough ammunition.⁸¹ Even in June 1944, a quarter of the Maquis had only enough ammunition to fight for a day.⁸² Finances were equally scarce; Henry Frenay had to launch Combat on just 14,000 Francs, and handouts from London were modest at best.⁸³ All these factors made it extremely difficult to constitute a significant hindrance to the German war effort, comparable with the efforts in the East.

There were, however, decisions made by the French which reduced the overall damage done by the Resistance. Despite the huge efforts of Moulin, one of these was the area of political divisions: throughout the war, relations between Resistance groups were characterized by constant bickering, from the very top level between De Gaulle and Giraud,⁸⁴ all the way down to the ground.⁸⁵ Every group had its own strategy, objectives and political vision for France.⁸⁶ This made co-operation extremely difficult, seriously hindering Resistance activities. A second factor was the lack of a “culture of protest”⁸⁷ amongst the population for most of the war; the lack of popular support for Resistance severely limited what it could achieve. Finally, and most importantly, there was a conscious decision to hold back; the leaders of the Resistance were well aware that the most aid they could give was in support of Allied armies, not acting alone,⁸⁸ and the efforts of General Koenig were aimed at readying a force for D-day, not in constant and costly harrying of the Germans.⁸⁹

When General Koenig finally ordered his men into battle, the long preparations paid off. In June 1944, the Resistance was hugely effective; despite all the limitations, the Resistance did manage to significantly hinder the German war effort. Eisenhower believed Resistance efforts were crucial to the success of Overlord.⁹⁰ Their great intelligence coups, though not on the scale of Ultra, meant that the Allies could plan their assault on ‘Fortress Europe’ effectively, armed with a complete plan of the Atlantic wall and a comprehensive order of battle.⁹¹ On the night of the 5th of June, some 950 rail cuts were made, and many phone lines were destroyed, seriously hindering the German response to D-day.⁹² It may have been bombing raids which destroyed the bridges on the Seine and Loire, but it was the Resistance which held down the German bridging equipment which would have replaced those bridges.⁹³ Michel estimates that the constant ambushes held two divisions away from the Normandy beaches on the 6th and 7th of June,⁹⁴ two divisions which “would have made matters incomparably more dangerous for [the Allies].”⁹⁵ The effects of all this Resistance activity were so marked that one Panzer division, having travelled from the Eastern Front to Strasbourg in a week, then took a further 3

⁸¹ Kedward (1993), 299-300

⁸² <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t129.e1232> on 21 February 2008

⁸³ Wieviorka (2000), p. 130

⁸⁴ Heaton, Colin (2001), p. 33

⁸⁵ Michel (1972), p. 305

⁸⁶ Wieviorka (2000), pp. 128-129

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 130

⁸⁸ Beevor (1981), p. 231

⁸⁹ Wieviorka (2000), p. 138

⁹⁰ Beevor (1981), p. 232

⁹¹ Foot (1976), pp. 24-25

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 252

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 315

⁹⁴ Michel (1972), p. 290

⁹⁵ Hastings, Max (1999), *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy 1944* (London: Pan), p. 93

weeks to reach Caen.⁹⁶ Aaron Bank, then of OSS, believed that all the sacrifices of Resistance were worth it just for the delays to reinforcing Normandy.⁹⁷ This was the crucial period, the *schwerpunkt*, and the Resistance came good, supporting the Allies with great effectiveness throughout the campaign in France and doing great damage to the German war effort. “The FFI...liberated towns, guarded prisoners, protected the flanks of the Allied armies, safeguarded their communications and kept order”,⁹⁸ performing many of the auxiliary tasks so that the Allies could concentrate on beating the Germans. Michel summarises the contribution of the Resistance in the campaign through France:

“the task of the Allies would have been far more arduous without its assistance. Imagine the Allies landing or advancing in the dark, without the eyes and ears of an entire population of accomplices, without its advice or its guides, still worse facing its hostility; all the Allied armies found to their cost the difference between advancing through friendly country and entering German territory.”⁹⁹

This was the significant hindrance to the German war effort, all compressed into the second half of 1944.

Yet it was not the greatest achievement of the Resistance. That it did do enough to constitute a significant hindrance is impressive, even though still more could have been done. Still more impressive, though, was the post-war effect of Resistance; a broken nation, too shocked by its defeat to confront its oppressors,¹⁰⁰ was shaken from its torpor by the Resistance, and regained the “self-respect that [she] lost in the moment of occupation.”¹⁰¹ Universal resistance became the founding myth of the Fourth Republic, despite the small numbers of people who were in reality involved,¹⁰² enabling De Gaulle to declare that Paris was “Liberated by the people of Paris with help from the armies of France, with the help and support of the whole of France.”¹⁰³ The true achievement of Resistance was in the rebirth of France, a united, energised France who could take on the swagger of a conquering Ally.

⁹⁶ Foot (1976), p. 315

⁹⁷ Heaton (2001), p. 44

⁹⁸ Michel (1972), p. 344

⁹⁹ Michel (1972), p. 358

¹⁰⁰ Kedward (1985), p. 46

¹⁰¹ Foot (1976), p. 319

¹⁰² “By December 1994, 260,919 CVR resistance veteran’s cards had been issued”. In Wiewiorka (2000), p. 125

¹⁰³ http://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/article.php3?id_article=514 on 21 February 2008

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