

Pétain, Vichy, and the Hunt for Nazi Spies: Another View

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Simon Kitson's Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis 1940-1942

refocuses attention to espionage in World War II France. His use of French archival materials, the "fonds de Moscou," which are counter-intelligence files taken from the French by Germany in 1943 and subsequently removed to Russia, to be returned again to France in the late 1990s, to portray the Vichy intelligence services arresting and executing French citizens spying for Germany makes compelling reading.¹ Not only did Vichy agents arrest and execute German and French spies working for Germany, they were also responsible for the head shaving of women caught in 1941 working for the Germans, in advance of the better known shavings that followed the Liberation.²

Kitson is clear in emphasizing that on major policy issues, Vichy lined up with Nazi Germany, demanding that the Allies withdraw from Syria in 1941 and North Africa in 1942. "Vichy [he notes] negotiated collaboration

¹Simon Kitson, Silence: Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis 1940-1942, Complexités de la politique de collaboration (Paris: Autrement, 2005), p. 7. More than one hundred persons were condemned to death by Vichy for spying for the Germans, ibid., p. 154. Pétain's approval of the execution of German spies is discussed on p. 172.

²ibid., pp. 116-117.

on all levels: economic, administrative, etc."³ Additional examples of Vichy's active pro-Axis collaboration include their bombing of Gibraltar by torpedo-carrying aircraft in retaliation against the British attack of 3 July 1940 on the French fleet at Oran and Mers-el-Kébir.⁴ A second French attack against Gibraltar followed the September 1940 Anglo-Gaullist attempt to land forces at Dakar in French West Africa. French batteries at Dakar opened fire on the British ships, preventing the Free French from coming ashore. The Dakar incident coincided with a visit to Berlin by Spanish Foreign Minister Ramón Serrano Suñer, who was negotiating possible Spanish entry into the war on the Axis side. Hitler made it clear to him, however, that Vichy France's spirited and active defense of Dakar made it a more valuable ally than General Francisco Franco's Spain.⁵

Kitson's book raises interesting questions of collaboration, itself a Janus-faced concept that is laden with positive and negative connotations that involve issues of intent, timing, and collaboration with whom.⁶ There are different ways of looking at this. Defenders of Vichy focus on the

³Ibid., p. 180.

⁴Bertram M. Gordon, "El papel de España en la derrota de la Alemania nazi durante la Segunda Guerra," Studia Historica/Studia Contemporanea, 18 (2000), p. 256.

⁵Ibid., p. 263. See also Donald S. Detwiler, Hitler, Franco und Gibraltar (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1962), pp. 46-47.

⁶On the concept and the Janus-faced nature of collaboration, see Bertram M. Gordon, "The Morphology of the Collaborator: The French Case," Journal of European Studies, 23 (parts 1 and 2): 89 and 90 (March-June 1993), p. 1.

"resistance" aspects of the government's policy of arresting and executing German spies. Critics of Vichy critics highlight the pro-Nazi policies that supported German persecutions of Communists and Jews, among others. Kitson himself is careful to avoid constructing his book as a defense of Vichy and he notes that the effect of the arrest of perhaps a few hundred German spies by Vichy pales in comparison to its support of the Axis war effort.⁷ Referring to Robert Paxton's picture of Vichy as a "government collaborating in part to safeguard its independence," Kitson argues that the evidence found in the archives returned from Russia shows a government torn between its desire to maintain its independence and at the same time not compromise a policy of collaboration upon which it was sincerely embarked.⁸

The Franco-German relationship, at least prior to the German occupation of the southern zone in November 1942, was fraught with paradox and ambiguity, according to Kitson. Germans were torn between a "brutal policy against all opponents" yet also a desire to utilize the Vichy

⁷Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis, pp. 198 and 201. See also Michael Anklin, "Anklin on Kitson, _Vichy et le chasse aux espions nazis, 1940-1942_," H-NET List on German History <H-GERMAN@H-NET.MSU.EDU>, 10 January 2006.

⁸Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis, p. 5. Robert O. Paxton saw Vichy as a chapter in a continuing French civil war, with the Pétain government further dividing rather than uniting the French. Wishing to maintain control of the state, the Vichy leaders granted ever greater concessions to the Germans and in so doing made accomplices of large numbers of the French in the Nazi enterprise. See Robert O. Paxton, Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944 (New York, 1972), pp. 382-383. For Kitson's reference to Paxton, see Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis, p. 177.

administration for their own ends. The Nazis wanted to weaken France permanently but at the same time preserve a local administration capable of preserving order and repelling any Allied attack. Consequently, Vichy was left with a limited but real sovereignty in the unoccupied southern zone and North Africa.⁹ Vichy policy combined two sometimes contradictory elements, Kitson notes: collaboration with Nazi Germany and defense of Vichy's own sovereignty.¹⁰ The preservation of its semi-independent sovereignty, at least until 1942, led Vichy to resist the German encroachments that took the form of espionage. It was the special courts set up to try Communists in 1940 that, paradoxically, ended up trying and convicting those accused of espionage for Germany.¹¹ Until 1943, Vichy courts continued to try those accused of having been "pacifists-defeatists" in 1939-1940, in other words, too pro-German, another paradox that Kitson finds.¹²

Three additional factors, however, might help contextualize Vichy's hunt for Nazi spies. First, France had a history of punishing those suspected of spying for the Germans. In a review of Kitson's book, Perry Biddiscombe refers to an "antipathy toward Germany [that] had been

⁹Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis, p. 25.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 101.

¹¹Ibid., p. 154.

¹²Ibid., p. 161.

strongly entrenched in the French military since 1870."¹³ Commentaries in a round-table sponsored by the H-Diplo list, edited by Diane Labrosse and Martin Thomas, correctly emphasized the influence of Charles Maurras and Action Française on Vichy's leaders and mid-level officials.¹⁴ The hunt for pro-German spies was not new even after the defeat of 1870. Resistance in French government and military circles to real or perceived pro-German activity was highlighted during the Revolutionary era when General Charles Dumouriez was criticized for being insufficiently arduous in his military campaign against the Austrians.¹⁵ The Dreyfus case in the 1890s was over supposedly leaked evidence to the Germans and Kitson duly notes that the anti-Semitism within the military counter espionage services at the time of the Dreyfus Affair led the Third Republic leaders to shift these duties to the police.¹⁶ In other words, the hunt for German spies was not new in 1940, as Kitson himself implies.¹⁷

¹³Perry Biddiscombe, "H-France Review: Biddiscombe on Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions," H-France Review, vol. X (October 2005), No.112; <http://h-france.net/vol5reviews/biddiscombe.html>

¹⁴Diane Labrosse and Martin Thomas, eds., Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions," H-Diplo, 2 June 2005, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/#kitson>

¹⁵Defeated at Neerwinden in March 1793, Dumouriez arrested the commissaries of the Convention sent to inquire into his conduct, handed them over to the enemy, and attempted to persuade his troops to march on Paris and overthrow the revolutionary government. When this attempt failed, he defected to the Austrians.

¹⁶Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis, p. 59.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 71 and 198.

The second point in the story of Vichy's policies of arresting German spies relates to the complex relationships among the Germans, the Vichy French, and Franco's Spain, after Hitler's armies appeared on the Spanish border in June 1940. Within a month of his defeat of France, Hitler had begun to consider a North African strategy for which he would press the Spanish for bases in the Canaries. Spain would also be asked to enter the war on the Axis side. As part of these preparations, on 15 July 1940, the Germans asked Vichy for eight air bases in the Casablanca region, along with wireless networks, weather stations, the Rabat-Tunis railway, and all the French ports along the Mediterranean. The French refused. Within three days, Vichy's Foreign Minister, Paul Baudouin had leaked the news of this request to the Spanish.¹⁸ According to Norman Goda, when Franco's confidante, Ramón Serrano Súñer visited first German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, and subsequently Hitler, in Germany on 16 September 1940, he had already been forewarned by Baudouin to be wary of German demands on Morocco. Of course, Baudouin was not Pétain, so this case is not as dramatic.¹⁹

By October 1940, with Britain still in the war against Germany, Hitler had decided on a new North African strategy involving the German capture

¹⁸Norman J. W. Goda, Tomorrow the World, Hitler, Northwest Africa, and the Path toward America (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), p. 73 and p. 226, note 12.

¹⁹Known as something of an "Anglophile" among Vichyites, Baudouin was replaced as French Foreign Minister by Pierre Laval on 28 October 1940.

of Gibraltar as a first step toward creating an empire across the Mediterranean. Taking over Gibraltar could have enabled the Germans to close the Mediterranean to the British and link up to North Africa, plans which if successful might have drastically altered the course of the war in the West.²⁰ In late October, Hitler traveled to visit Franco, a visit that was sandwiched between two stops at Montoire in France to see Pétain. Wishing to extend his North African Empire in the aftermath of the French defeat, Franco had designs on Gibraltar and looked for Hitler's help in acquiring it. Hitler, however, was planning for German troops to take Gibraltar and possibly stay there indefinitely rather than turning it over to Spain, which ran contrary to Franco's understanding of the situation. Once in Gibraltar, German forces could launch a cross-Mediterranean strike to build their own empire in North Africa. Hitler had mentioned such plans to Japanese diplomats but he said nothing of this when he met Franco on 23 October at Hendaye. Pétain, who knew Franco from his earlier stint as France's Ambassador to Madrid, had warned Franco prior to the Hendaye meeting to be ready for trouble from Hitler. In his book on the relations between Franco and Pétain, Matthieu Séguéla writes that Franco, having been alerted to Hitler's designs on Gibraltar, was careful to note that the German leader told him nothing of what would become of Gibraltar once

²⁰Gordon, "El papel de España en la derrota de la Alemania nazi," pp. 281-282.

occupied by German forces.²¹ While Hitler was trying to negotiate Spain's entry into the war on the Axis side during the fall of 1940, in other words, Pétain was cautioning Franco to stay out. If Pétain was acting against Germany in the Spanish affair, if, indeed, he was working toward a secret alliance with Spain against German interests, it should not surprise for him to arrest pro-Nazi spies at home.²²

The third point in the contextualizing of the Vichy hunt for German spies is the personality of Pétain himself. There is a personal or psycho-historical note on Pétain in all of this. Although many remember him as the victor at Verdun, the Dictionnaire historique de la vie politique en France (1995) remarks that calling him the "victor of Verdun is improper."²³ It may be more accurate to say that Pétain was more the supply master at Verdun, not so much a battle as it was a supply and attrition from strong position.²⁴

Although in 1940 Pétain was remembered primarily for his role as the victor at Verdun, his role may have been more important in nearly

²¹Ibid., p. 266. See also Matthieu Séguela, Pétain-Franco: les secrets d'une alliance (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), p. 107.

²²As time went on and it became clearer that the Germans would not win in the West, Franco and Pétain drew closer together into what Séguela calls an alliance. See Séguela, Pétain-Franco, pp. 137ff.

²³Quoted in Frederic Raphael, "Marshal Pétain and Vichy France," Times Literary Supplement (8 July 2005), p. 15. See also, J.-J. Becker, "PÉTAIN, Philippe (marechal)," in Jean-François Sirinelli, ed., Dictionnaire historique de la vie politique française au XXe siècle (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), p. 783.

²⁴Becker, "PÉTAIN," p. 783.

capitulating to the spring 1918 German offensive prior to his being superseded by General Ferdinand Foch. On 21 March 1918, the Germans, now freed by the Bolshevik Revolution and the Brest-Litovsk peace with Russia of a threat in the east, launched a major offensive, named for General Erich von Ludendorff, that was designed to bring final victory in the West. Two hundred German divisions advanced against the British and Arras in the north and in the Somme Valley to the south. By 24 March, it appeared that the British would not be able to hold their sector. General Douglas Haig, in charge of the British forces, feared that Pétain would order a French retreat to defend Paris and thereby expose the British.²⁵

Ludendorff's plans in all respects replicated the 1916 Verdun offensive, with the German supply lines growing overextended as they advanced with their forces increasingly bogging down. The English and French had only to wait for the Germans to run out of steam. Because of the lack of a unified command, the priorities of Haig and Pétain were, based on their perceptions of their national interests, quite different. Haig held out for a unified command, which ultimately was given to Foch, who favored a stand at Amiens. Expecting the British to be driven to the Channel ports, Pétain preferred to use his forces to defend Paris. Richard Griffiths, a biographer of Pétain, writes that "this foreshadows 1940 in more senses than one." Pétain distrusted Haig's desire to maintain contact between the

²⁵Richard Griffiths, Pétain, A Biography of Marshal Philippe Pétain of Vichy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 69.

British and French armies as egocentric and a strategy to be maintained at France's expense. His disregard of the British, "his shortsighted view that France came first, was repeated in the Second World War as well."²⁶

Pétain, according to Griffiths, showed two types of pessimism: a rational belief in the importance of the defensive so as to save men, dismissed as pessimistic by some of his peers, and a true pessimism in the face of defeat, which almost led to losing the war in March 1918 and which would emerge again in 1940.²⁷ In his diary, Raymond Poincaré noted that Pétain had told Georges Clemenceau that the Germans "will beat the English hands down, and then they'll beat us" and that France should begin peace negotiations.²⁸ The naming of Foch as Generalissimo effectively masked Pétain's gaffe. The Anglo-British misunderstandings of March 1918 were remembered in June 1940 during last-ditch negotiations when Winston Churchill and Sir Edward Spears visited Paris in the hope of keeping France in the war.²⁹

Pétain's readiness to yield in 1918 and 1940 did not make him particularly pro-German. A recent controversy over the role of Sir Arthur

²⁶Ibid., p. 73.

²⁷Ibid., p. 74. Griffiths argued that the cost of defending Verdun in 1916 and quelling the mutinies in 1917 had turned the General into a pessimist, ready to see events in the gloomiest light. "When faced by an unexpected crisis, as in March 1918, he tended to fear the worst." See ibid., p. 87.

²⁸Quoted in Herbert R. Lottman, Pétain, Hero or Traitor: The Untold Story (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1985), p. 76.

²⁹Marc Ferro, Pétain (Paris: Fayard, 1987), p. 75.

Bryant in Britain shows that Pétain's unwillingness to engage Germany in war was not exceptional. Bryant's role in seeking accommodation with Nazi Germany has been controversial, as is Pétain's.³⁰ It also shows how crucial the accession of Winston Churchill was for the British war effort in 1940. The Pétain approach to the war can be seen as a synecdoche for the peace parties of Western Europe and the United States in general.

Vichy's hunt for Nazi spies, which took place under the leadership and with the apparent consent of Pétain, was part of a longer pattern of political and military obfuscation in France, perpetuated and continued through the Algerian war, in defense of a commonly understood French elitism that neither favored nor opposed German interests on the assumption that they would eventually pass. Instead, the actions of Pétain and his associates described by Kitson, in 1940 and thereafter reflect a view at some level that the French had not really lost the war in 1940.³¹ Their hunting for German spies continued a pattern of behavior already noted with Dumouriez during the Revolution, but more significantly during the Dreyfus Affair, still a live memory for Pétain and many of the others.

³⁰See George Feaver, "Always England," a review of Julia Stapleton, Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2005), in the Times Literary Supplement (6 January 2006), p. 6; and the epistolary exchange that followed in the April issues of the TLS, among Andrew Roberts, Feaver, and Stapleton regarding the extent to which Bryant may have been a "fascist" or a collaborator.

³¹For a discussion of the longstanding anti-German sentiments in Vichy military circles, see Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis, p. 173.

The French government was behaving as if it had not actually lost the war. It was as abysmally blindfolded during its Vichy moment as it had been for the previous 100 or so years. When the Allies landed in Morocco, they found that the French were willing to fight in defense of their territory, even if it not for terribly long. Pointing out that Vichy agents collaborated on occasion with the Allies and the Gaullists, Kitson notes that veterans of these services argued after the war that they had been among the first Resisters and that the word "resistance" had been present in some of their early documents. "These [agents], [he wrote], seemed always to envision it in a Vichy cadre and in a defensive meaning."³² What is evident is a Vichy government explaining in effect to itself that no World War II had occurred, that things were just as they had been in 1937 or 1910 with many of the same individuals in charge of decision-making. The illusion persisted, Kitson adds, on the part of some Vichy agents that one could fight against Germany and at the same time not be against Vichy.³³ Vichy policy, he adds, sought to preserve administrative autonomy by keeping the Germans out of the unoccupied zone prior to November 1942 and limiting contact between French citizens and German occupation authorities, where the latter were present.³⁴ If the Vichy authorities ever did become really convinced that France had lost the war of 1940, it was perhaps only after

³²Ibid., pp. 98-99.

³³Ibid., p. 100.

³⁴Ibid., p. 109.

the occupation of the southern zone in November 1942 when the German presence and pressure could no longer be wished away and when Kitson shows that they began to moderate their willingness to execute those caught spying for Germany.³⁵ The unwillingness of Vichy agents to fall in line in a single coherent pro-German policy had parallels in Germany itself, where Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, who headed the Abwehr, the military intelligence organization, and may have worked against Hitler's attempts to bring Spain into the war.³⁶

In conclusion, Kitson has produced excellent evidence regarding the dynamics of the Pétain government at Vichy but rather than elucidating the Vichy intelligence circles as collaborators or resisters, in the usual meaning of these terms, his evidence appears to be equivocal. Some of the spies arrested by Vichy may have been working both sides. If, as appears likely by October 1940, Pétain was trying to establish an entente with Spain at Germany's expense, it is logical that he would want to remove German

³⁵Ibid., p. 163.

³⁶By 1943 Canaris was actively engaged in the anti-Nazi resistance and the following year was executed after the failure of the July Plot to assassinate Hitler. See Robert H. Whealey, "Wilhelm Canaris 1887-1945" in James A. Moncure, ed., Research Guide to European Historical Biography, 1450-Present (Washington, D. C.: Beacham Publishing, Inc., 1992), I, p. 285. Canaris's role in Spain is discussed in Gordon, "El papel de España en la derrota de la Alemania nazi," pp. 273-274 and 280-281. For Canaris and the French in Spain, see Bertram M. Gordon, Collaborationism in France during the Second World War (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 208. Current issues around the civilian as opposed to military leadership in the American Central Intelligence Agency are a reminder of the complexities and long-term fissures within intelligence organizations.

spies, indeed, it would be interesting to know what kinds of information these spies were carrying.³⁷

The arrests of German spies by Vichy can best be understood not as a silent defense against German exactions and therefore a sort of first "resistance," for, as Kitson makes clear, the Vichy intelligence services worked against both Axis and Allies.³⁸ It reflects instead a pattern of political and military obfuscation perpetuated at least since the Dreyfus Affair.³⁹ This tendency continued arguably to be an element in French military thinking all the way through the Algerian War and evident in the Service d'action civique [SAC], created by General de Gaulle in 1958. Close if not identical to Charles Maurras' "la seule France," this model stood in defense of a commonly understood French elitism that represented the same mentality against which the rebels of 1968 struggled.⁴⁰ In other words, the Vichy hunt for pro-German collaborators represented a stage in a century-long pattern of politico-military thinking that began with the 1870

³⁷On French-Spanish rapprochement in late 1940 and thereafter, see H. Haywood Hunt, "Spain, Relations with France (1938-1946), in Bertram M. Gordon, ed., Historical Dictionary of World War II France: The Occupation, Vichy and the Resistance, 1938-1946 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 334-335.

³⁸Kitson, Vichy et la chasse aux espions Nazis, p. 52.

³⁹See Griffiths, Pétain, p. 343.

⁴⁰For "la seule France," see Gordon, "The Morphology of the Collaborator," pp. 12 and 17, and Eugen Weber, Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 468 and 474-475. Weber emphasizes the pervasive influence of Action Française in 20th century France.

war and did not change until a century later following the 1968 revolt and the emergence of the European Community.