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## *From Pétain to Macron, from the Resistance to the Yellow Vests: 1944-1945, the false purge of "the collaborators" in France*



Sources: Global Research [Photo: Women accused of collaborating in Paris, summer 1944 (Bundesarchiv)]

Translated from English for Rebellion by Beatriz Morales Bastos

French historian Annie Lacroix-Riz questions in her latest book, "La Non-épuration en France de 1943 aux années 1950" (Armand Colin, Paris, 2019) [The Non-Purification of

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France of 1943 in the 1950s] an idea of the liberation of the country in 1944-1945 (and the subsequent period) that has been dominant lately in a historiography increasingly controlled by the right wing of the political spectrum ("right-wing").

This idea is extremely critical of the Resistance and, conversely, quite lenient about collaboration. For example, it is claimed that the Resistance was not effective in general, so that France owes its liberation almost exclusively to the efforts of the Americans and other Western allies (the latter seconded by General De Gaulle's "Free French" forces), who landed in Normandy in June 1944. We are further told that the Resistance took the opportunity presented by liberation to commit all kinds of atrocities, including the murder and public shaving of young women guilty of "horizontal collaboration", that is, of having had romantic relations with German soldiers. This "savage purge" of collaborators was supposedly tantamount to a "communist terror" organized by communists, real or false members of the Resistance, in an attempt to fulfill their sinister revolutionary goals.

Except in the most flagrant cases, "dominant historiography" now presents collaborators as decent, respectable, well-meaning and "upright citizens" ("gens très bien", an expression taken from the title of a novel by Alexandre Jardin) in most cases, victims of the coercion of the Germans, powerless and therefore innocent "subordinates", caught unable to defend themselves between the Nazi Scilla and the Caribdis of the Resistance, and that they often participated themselves in secret acts of the Resistance. Of course, some collaborators were fanatics and did commit crimes, but they were mostly lower-class thugs, the best example of which were members of the Vichy regime's notorious paramilitary organization, the Militia.

In 1944-1945 the French provisional government headed by General de Gaulle finally managed to restore "law and order". This is how, supposedly, a Gaullist rule of law was born in France after years of economic and political problems, military defeat, German occupation and the confusion of liberation. Even so, an inevitable purge of real and imagined collaborators took place, which claimed many innocent victims, especially in the upper ranks of the state bureaucracy, the *crème de la crème* of business and the elite of the nation in general.

Lacroix-Riz demolishes this revisionist interpretation in his new book, meticulously researched and documented, which is also full of names of both obscure and important personalities, which makes it somewhat difficult to read for those who are not familiar with the history of France in the Second World War. In her previous books, such as *Le choix de la défaite and De Munich à Vichy*, this historian first explained that in the spring of 1940 France's political, military and economic elite had handed over the country to the Nazis in order to install a fascist regime in the hope that an authoritarian system of government would be more sensitive to their needs and desires than the system that existed before the war. that of the "Third Republic", which was considered too lenient with the working class, especially under the "Popular Front" government of 1936 and 1937. Lacroix-Riz followed up with other meticulously researched studies (*Industriels et banquiers français sous l'Occupation* and *Les élites françaises, 1940-1944. From the collaboration avec l'Allemagne à l'alliance américaine*) which showed that this elite had prospered under the auspices of the Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain, had enthusiastically collaborated with the Germans and fought tooth and nail against a Resistance in which people belonging to the working class and communists predominated, and was determined to introduce radical changes, even revolutionaries, after the war. This historian now shows that liberation was not accompanied by a real purge of collaborators but, on the contrary, that the "*gens très bien*" of France's state and business elite managed to atone for their collaborationist sins and that much of the Vichy system that had served them so well from 1940 to 1944 remained in force. you could say that until today.

Let's start with the so-called "savage purge," the supposed persecution of innocent people by communist partisans or communists posing as partisans, presumably in an attempt to eliminate rivals and opponents to prepare a revolutionary coup d'état. Lacroix-Rix shows that there were murders and summary executions, but most occurred in the context of the bloody fighting that arose already before the Normandy landings and the liberation of Paris. Contrary to the resistance's theory of military ineffectiveness, it derailed the enemy's preparations for a defense against the Allied landing in Normandy and caused heavy casualties, as the German authorities themselves admitted. And most of the atrocities perpetrated in the context of that form of war were not the work of partisans, but of the Nazis and collaborators, especially the Militia, for example, the execution of hostages and the infamous Oradour-sur-Glane massacre. On the other hand, those who fought in the Resistance did not attack innocent victims, but German soldiers and particularly detestable

collaborators, often men whom General de Gaulle's Free French radio program in England had repeatedly called for punishing (and even executing). As far as the women who had their heads shaved concerned, many, if not most, of them were guilty of more heinous activities than mere "horizontal collaboration", for example, of betraying members of the Resistance.

There was no "savage purge" before or during the liberation and the supposed major purge that was to occur after the liberation itself turned out to be a farce. France's state and private sector elite had taken advantage of collaboration and had good reason to fear the coming to power of their Resistance enemies. But the radicals of the Resistance did not come to power after liberation, the elite was punished little or nothing for their collaborationist sins, their beloved capitalist socio-economic order remained intact (despite some reforms), and the elite itself retained most of its power and privileges. They had to thank this undeserved blessing both to the Americans who had liberated the once *great Nation* and to General Charles de Gaulle, the general who aspired to make France great again.

De Gaulle was a true patriot, but also a conservative man, extremely devoted to France's established economic and social order. As far as the Americans, destined to succeed the Germans as masters of Europe or at least of the western half of the continent, were determined to make "free enterprise" triumph throughout Europe and to place the continent under the political and economic orbit of Uncle Sam, which meant preventing any political and socio-economic change, except merely cosmetic, without regard to the wishes and aspirations of those who had resisted the Nazis and other fascists, nor of the people in general. It also meant forgiving, supporting and protecting those collaborators who had anti-communist credentials, which is exactly what members of France's elite had been. In fact, the American authorities had nothing against the Vichy regime and initially hoped that it would subsist once the Germans were expelled from France, either under Pétain or under any other Vichy personality, such as Weygand or Darlan, if necessary after a purge of their most furious pro-German elements and after applying a patina of democracy. After all, the Vichy system had essentially functioned as the political superstructure of France's capitalist socio-economic system, a system that Washington sought to save from the clutches of its left-wing enemies in the Resistance. On the contrary, after the setbacks suffered by Germany on the Eastern Front and in particular

after the Battle of Stalingrad, many Vichy collaborators saw it clearly and hoped for salvation in the form of an "American future" for France or, in the words of Lacroix-Riz, moving from a German "tutor" to an American one. After a liberation by the Americans they could expect their sins and even their collaborationist crimes to be forgiven and forgotten, while the revolutionary or even simply progressive aspirations of the Resistance were to be doomed to remain an impossible dream.

Washington's leaders did not like de Gaulle. Like Vichy supporters, they considered him a façade of the Communists, someone who, if he came to power, was going to pave the way for a "Bolshevik" takeover, just as Kerensky had preceded Lenin during the Russian Revolution of 1917. But little by little they realized, as Churchill had done before them, that it was going to be impossible to enlist the French people with a personality that was associated with Vichy and that a government headed by de Gaulle turned out to be the only alternative to one established by the Resistance, which was dominated by the communists and had radical reformist ideas. They needed the general to neutralize the Communists when hostilities ended. De Gaulle himself managed to reassure Washington by promising to respect the socio-economic *status quo* and as a guarantee of this commitment he incorporated into his Free France movement many Vichy collaborators who enjoyed the favors of the Americans and were even entrusted with positions of responsibility. De Gaulle thus became a "right-wing leader", acceptable to both the French elite and the Americans, who were willing to succeed the Germans as "protectors" of that elite's interests. This is the context in which de Gaulle was rushed to Paris when the city was liberated at the end of August 1944. The idea was to prevent the Communist-dominated Resistance from trying to establish a provisional government in the capital. The Americans saw to it that de Gaulle strutted around the Champs-Élysées as the savior that patriotic France had been waiting for four long years. And finally, on October 23, 1944, Washington made him official and recognized him as leader of the provisional government of liberated France.

Under the auspices of General de Gaulle France replaced the Vichy system with a new democratic political superstructure, the "Fourth Republic" (in 1958 that system was to be replaced by a more authoritarian, American-style presidential system, the "Fifth Republic"). And the working class, which had suffered so much under the Vichy regime, was offered a package of benefits including higher wages, paid holidays, health and

unemployment insurance, generous pension schemes and other social services; in short, a modest type of "welfare state." All these measures had the widespread support of salaried commoners, but were rejected by the patricians of the elite and especially by the employers, by the employers. However, the elite were pleased that these measures calmed the working class, thereby taking the wind out of the revolutionary sails of the Communists, even though the Communists were at the height of their prestige because of the leading role they had played in the Resistance and their relationship with the Soviet Union. that in France she was still generally considered the victor of Nazi Germany.

The men and women of the Resistance were officially elevated to the category of heroes, monuments and streets were dedicated to them. Conversely, the collaborationists were officially "purged" and their most abject representatives were punished, even some of them were sentenced to the death penalty, but for example, the sinister Pierre Laval, and important economic collaborators, such as the car manufacturer Renault, were nationalized. But with General de Gaulle's provisional government replete with recycled Vichy members and Uncle Sam looking over his shoulder, de Gaulle ensured that only the Vichy regime's bigwigs who had the highest profile were punished or purged. Many, if not most, of the collaborationist banks and corporations owed their salvation to having an American connection, for example Ford's French subsidiary. Many death sentences were commuted, and France's new U.S. supreme chiefs secretly drove out of the country the top officials of the Nazi occupation (such as Klaus Barbie) and collaborators who had committed serious crimes to start a new life in South America or even North America, as Americans appreciated the anti-communist zeal of those men. Many collaborators were saved because they managed to present false "certificates of Resistance" or because they suddenly contracted diseases that caused their trials to be postponed and ended up being annulled. Local officials guilty of having worked with and for the Germans escaped reprisals by being transferred to a city where their collaborationist past was not known, for example, from Bordeaux to Dijon. And most of those who were found guilty only received a very light punishment, a mere tug of the ears. All this was possible because General de Gaulle's government, and in particular his Ministry of Justice, were full of unrepentant former Vichy members. No wonder they made up what Lacroix-Riz calls "a club of passionate opponents of the purge."

Although France's elite had to endure again, as before 1940, the drawbacks of a democratic parliamentary system in which commoners were allowed some participation, they managed to firmly retain control of the unelected centers of power of the post-war French state, such as the army, the judicial system, and the high ranks of the bureaucracy and police, some centers that he had always monopolized. For example, Vichy generals, most of whom were known to have been enemies of the Resistance who had conveniently converted to Gaullism, retained control of the armed forces and many senior officials who had diligently served Pétain or the German occupation forces retained their positions and were able to continue their prestigious careers and benefit from promotions and honors. Annie Lacroix-Riz concludes that General de Gaulle's supposed "rule of law" sabotaged the purge of [collaborationist] high officials and thus allowed [...] that a Vichy hegemony over the French judicial system survived" and, we might add, that a Vichy-style system in general survived.

In 1944-1945 the elite of France did not atone for their collaborationist sins and were fortunate that thanks to the introduction of a social security system the revolutionary threat to their capitalist socio-economic order, embodied by the Resistance, could be averted. Thus, the bitter class conflict between patricians and commoners of France at the time of the war, which was reflected in the collaboration-resistance dichotomy, did not really end, but merely a truce was given. And that truce was essentially "gaullista" since it was signed under the auspices of a personality who was conservative enough for the taste of the French elite and their new American "tutors", but whose impeccable patriotism won him the affection of the Resistance and its voters.

However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the communist threat, the French elite no longer considered it necessary to maintain the system of social services it had reluctantly adopted. The task of dismantling the French "welfare state," undertaken under the auspices of pro-American presidents such as Sarkozy and now Macron, was facilitated by the European *Union's de facto* adoption of neoliberalism, an ideology that advocates a return to *unfettered laissez-faire* capitalism. *In this way the class war that had faced collaboration with the Resistance during the Second World War was restarted.* It is in this context that French historiography was increasingly dominated by a revisionism that is critical of the Resistance, and lenient with collaboration and even with fascism itself. Annie Lacroix-Riz's book offers a much-needed antidote to this falsification

of history. Let us hope that other historians will follow suit and investigate the extent to which revisionist historiography (and right-wing politicians) in other European countries, such as Italy and Belgium, have rehabilitated fascists and collaborationists, and denigrated the anti-fascist Resistance.

We have one last point to make. Macron seeks to destroy a welfare state that was introduced after liberation to prevent the revolutionary changes advocated by the Communist-led Resistance. Play with fire. Indeed, by trying to liquidate social services that limit, but do not prevent, the accumulation of capital and which, therefore, in essence are nothing but a nuisance to the established socio-economic order, it is removing a major obstacle to revolution, a real existential threat to that order. Their offensive has provoked widespread resistance, that of the Yellow Vests\*. Admittedly, this motley group is not led by a communist vanguard like the Resistance at the time of the war, but it certainly seems to have revolutionary potential. The conflict between, on the one hand, a president who represents the French elite and their American tutors, and who in many ways is the heir of Pétain, and, on the other hand, the Yellow Vests who represent the discontented and restless plebeian masses who yearn for change, heirs of the partisans of the wartime, it can make France experience something it was spared at the time of liberation: a revolution, and a real cleansing, not a false one.

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