



**Armed with a smile or a dagger:  
*Women in the French Resistance***

Barbara Opar  
Syracuse University Library  
April 13, 2012



*Lucie Aubrac*

*Genevieve Soulie*

*Helene Deschamps*

*Marie Louise Dissard (Francoise)*

*Lucie Boutillier du Retail*

*Gabrielle Buffet Picabia*

*Germaine Tillion*

*Bertie Albrecht*

*Yvonne Oddon*

*Mother Yvonne Aime de Jesus*

# **Armed with a smile or a dagger: Women in the French Resistance**

*Andree (Dedee) de Jongh*

*Danielle Casanova*

# What was the French Resistance?

*“From its very inception to the present day the French Resistance has been represented and commemorated in the epic mode.”*

(Nathan Bracher, “Remembering the French Resistance; Ethics and Poetics of the Epic” *History and Memory*, v.19, spring/summer 2007, p. 39)

As you will learn in this presentation, some of the deeds undertaken by French women during the Nazi occupation are indeed epic- heroic, extraordinary...

But while the image of the cloak and dagger spy is true, many women contributed to the movement in more subtle, yet important ways.

# Setting the Stage

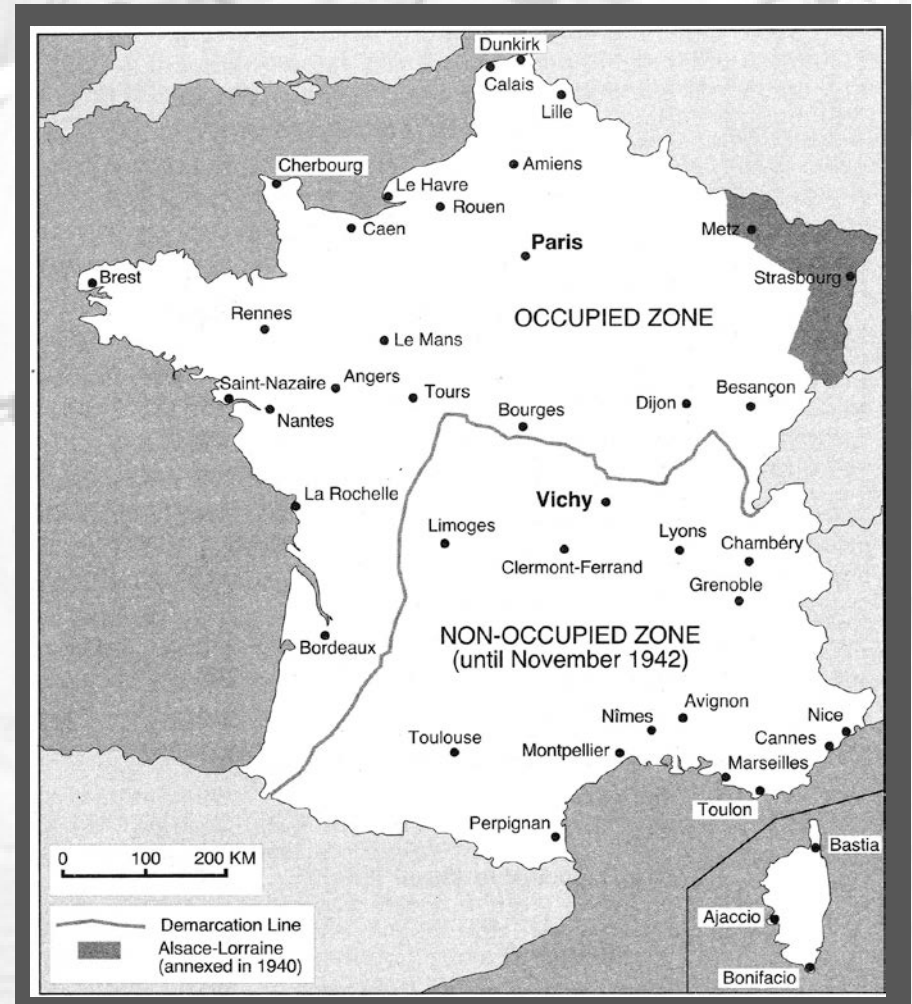
In order to better understand the role of women in the French Resistance, it is important to first understand what was happening in France during the Vichy years.

*“In retrospect, the most striking thing about the fall of France was the suddenness and thoroughness of it all. Even Hitler’s spectacular successes in Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg had failed to prepare world public opinion for the complete collapse of the France of Jeffre, Foch, and Clemenceau...It was with a sense of disbelief that one learned of the French surrender at Compiegne on June 22”*

(Osgood, *The Fall of France 1940: Causes and Responsibilities*, p. vii)

# June 1940: France falls

A France ill prepared for modern warfare and lacking the appropriate **'elan vital'** was now controlled by the Germans. France was divided into an occupied zone to the north and a free zone to the south. Under the once revered Marshall Petain, the new government, centered in Vichy, began to collaborate with the Germans—in a series of stages.





# France in the Occupation

Hitler did not station as many troops in France as elsewhere.

However, after 1941, France became the largest supplier of labor, raw materials and manufactured goods in the countries occupied by the Germans.

Forced labor was a major factor in the disintegration of the Vichy state.



Marshal Philippe Pétain (left) shakes hands with Adolf Hitler at Montoire, 24 October 1940.

# Vichy Politics vs. the Resistance

*“I would venture to say that Vichy in its last stages was no more than the politics of opportunism, drawn towards highly-derivative, Nazi-style, solutions, but with no coherent ideology, and no fundamental class basis.”* (Kedward and Austin, *Vichy France and the Resistance: Culture and Ideology*, p.3)

*“Before 1942, Resistance was a notable force in the French reaction to the Occupation but it could not be said to constitute an ideology until the Resisters came to monopolize the political legacy of republican defense and the citizen at arms”* (Kedward and Austin, p. 4)



## Life goes on...

During the Occupation, it sometimes seemed like life went on as usual. Couples attended cultural events like the opera or went to dances. Some women still seemed focused on fashion, selecting new hats like this one designed by Agnes.





Some French women were attracted to power, and began to fraternize with German soldiers stationed in their area.

At the same time, city life during the Occupation often included long lines or shops out of food



# Focus on Traditional Roles for Women

The Vichy government encouraged women to bear more children and to expend their energies on activities centering on family life.



# The roles of women in the French Resistance:

## *Traditional*

- Helping the displaced
- Feeding orphans
- Mending or securing clothes for those in need
- Helping run the farm
- Nursing the sick or wounded





# The roles of women in the French Resistance: *Aid and Abet*

Women helped downed British soldiers secure appropriate change of clothes, walked them through towns, and served as guides for established routes of escape.

*“The German victory created an immediate need for organized operations that would help Allied soldiers and sympathizers escape to Britain. The earliest efforts by patriots wanting to do something for the Allies were feeding, sheltering and transporting the fugitives they met more or less accidentally.” ...Such impromptu aid by ordinary people gradually developed into a complex structure of escape lines involving about 10,000 resisters, many of whom were women.”* (Rossiter, Women in the Resistance, p. 23)



# Women in the Resistance



**Many of the women involved in the Resistance were indeed “ordinary” people.**

More than a few were married, often with children. Members had different religious affiliations, if any. A number were anti-fascist, some Communist. But even seemingly simple or non violent acts like finding clothing for downed airmen or escorting the same through towns were considered serious violations and if caught the resisters would be brought before a military tribunal.

# *Germaine Tillion*

## and the creation of a Resistance structure

- French anthropologist
- 33 years of age when she first began to organize early resistance groups in occupied France.
- An amateur, Tillion nonetheless helped to invent the structure of resistance groups.
- Tillion was able to obtain the addresses of places where the demarcation line could be crossed without the special pass required by the Germans.



<http://www.germaine-tillion.org>

# Musee de l'Homme

Tillion then became involved with the resistance work of her friends at the *Musee de l'Homme*.



*Yvonne Oddon*, the librarian at the museum, sent books and clothes to French prisoners of war at camps near Paris. With the help of a friend, *Lucie Boutillier du Retail*, she also provided prisoners with shelter, food and information about escape routes.

# Escape Routes

Four women came to lead large scale escape organizations, those of ***Comet, Françoise, Marie Claire, and Marie Odile***. At least ten women were known to be chiefs of smaller lines, others were subchiefs or heads of regional sectors.

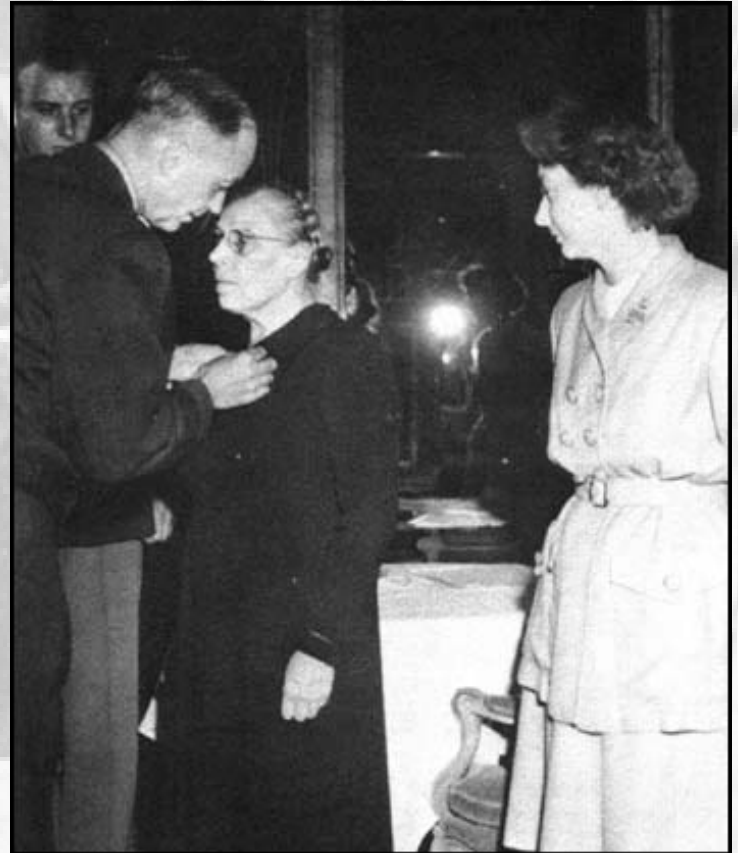
	<u>Percent Female</u>
Comet Line	65-70 %
Burgundy Line	40%
Marie Odile Line	36%
Brandy Line	35%
Françoise	20%

Comet was led by ***Andree (Dedee) de Jongh***, a young, slim Belgian woman. She led escaping soldiers through the Pyrenees –often at night, making 20 trips back and forth, conducting 118 evaders until she was arrested by the Gestapo on January 15, 1943. She was transferred to a number of different prisons, subject to 17 interrogations by the police of the Luftwaffe, endured the Ravensbruck concentration camp and was finally rescued from the Mauthausen concentration camp by the International Red Cross in early May 1945.



# *Marie Louise Dissard*

Another escape line was anchored in Toulouse with the 60 year old **Marie Louise Dissard** as director. Known by her code name, **Francoise**, Marie Louise began her work when she was asked to rent a place for a Jewish tailor and his wife. She eventually enlisted guides and keepers of safe houses, purchased food on the Black Market and even canned food to send to her nephew who was a German prisoner of war. Her small apartment eventually became headquarters for the line.



“According to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Harold O. Freeman, she exerted great influence among fellow workers in the resistance”.

(Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance*, p. 31)



# ***Gabrielle Buffet Picabia***



The ex-wife of the Dada artist, she was the Paris link for the Ali-France escape line.

# *Aid and Abet:* ***Genevieve Soulie***

Soulie was head of lodging in Paris, but this duty involved more than arranging for shelter. She was also responsible for the security and morale of Allied soldiers awaiting departure.

She helped the escape of 136 Allied airmen, carrying out *“dangerous and tiring work with complete disregard for her own comfort and safety, according to a leader of the Burgundy Line.”* (Rossiter, *Women in the Resistance*, p. 68)





*Aid and Abet:*

# ***Mother Yvonne Aime de Jesus***

Membership in a religious order did not provide protection against deportation or death if the Germans suspected members of the order of aiding escapees. Yet, conscience drove some to assist, if not in an organized way, in the Resistance.

The mother superior of a convent of Augustinian sisters in Malesroit, Brittany, Mother Yvonne was skilled at throwing the Germans off the scent, once ***disguising Allied airmen as nuns. The clinic of the convent often provided shelter for escaping soldiers or resisters.***



# The roles of women in the French Resistance: *Clandestine Work (Spies!)*

Stories of acts of defiance and bravery are legend in the history of the Resistance. An elderly countess requested travel passes supposedly for young children directly from Bismarck's grandson- only to pass them along to escaping airmen.

No story is perhaps as exciting as that of ***Lucie Aubrac***.



# Acts of Bravery:

## ***Lucie Aubrac***

- She survived the war and later penned her autobiography, chronicling her nine months in the French Resistance.
- Aubrac was a teacher in Lyon who, with her husband, helped found the early resistance group, ***Liberation Sud***.

In October 1943, Lucie rescued her husband from the Gestapo with the following ploy:

*“Sir, I come from an officer’s family, I know what order and discipline mean. I’m not here to beg for mercy for this man. But I’m expecting his child. For my family’s sake and for society’s, I absolutely cannot be an unwed mother. And this child is entitled to have a father. In French law there is an article permitting marriage on the eve of death. It’s called marriage in extremis....”*

*(Aubrac, Outwitting the Gestapo, p 125)*

The scheme allows Lucie to visit her husband, scout out the prison layout and, working with several others, forcibly rescue him in a Citroen, machine guns in hand, while he is being transported.





# **Raymond Aubrac Obituary**

## **10 April, 2012**



*PARIS (AP)* - Raymond Aubrac, one of the last major figures of the French Resistance who got away from the Nazis' grasp in a now-legendary escape led by his equally renowned wife, has died. He was 97.

Aubrac died late Tuesday at Paris' Val-de-Grace military hospital, said his granddaughter Helene Helfer Aubrac. She said he had been hospitalized in recent days after suffering from fatigue.

Born Raymond Samuel on July 31, 1914, to Jewish parents who were deported to Auschwitz, he and his wife - born as Lucie Bernard - took up the nom de guerre Aubrac after joining the Resistance early on in World War II. They helped set up Liberation-Sud (Liberation South), one of the first networks of the Resistance against the Nazi occupation of France.

Raymond Aubrac was captured along with celebrated Resistance hero Jean Moulin on June 21, 1943, when police raided a Resistance meeting spot - a doctor's office - near the southeastern city of Lyon.

Lucie Aubrac helped orchestrate her husband's escape from a Lyon prison following his arrest. She persuaded the local Gestapo leader, Klaus Barbie, to let her meet with her imprisoned husband. During the meeting, she told Aubrac of the Resistance's plan to attack the German truck that was to transfer him to another prison, then herself led the armed commando attack that sprung both her husband and Moulin.

President Nicolas Sarkozy, in a statement, said the escape had "entered into the legend of the history of the Resistance," and praised Aubrac and all Resistance members as "heroes of the shadows who saved France's honor, at a time when it seemed lost."

After the war, Lucie Aubrac returned to the classroom, teaching history and geography, while Raymond went on to a successful career in government and banking. He retained ties to Communists and Socialists.

Raymond Aubrac backed Socialist Francois Hollande for France's two-round presidential election starting on April 22; his wife died at age 94 just weeks before the last presidential election in 2007 when Hollande's longtime partner and fellow Socialist Segolene Royal lost to the conservative Sarkozy.

"The death of a man doesn't prevent his fight from continuing," Hollande told reporters. He said he'd met with Aubrac about three weeks ago and was told that the ex-Resistance fighter was closely watching the race.

# *Information Gathering & Spying:* ***Helene Deschamps***

Helene Deschamps, while having no special training in espionage, ***collected information about German troop movements and coastal defenses, penetrating enemy lines to gather and report back findings.***

Women were often used for such missions because they attracted less attention and were not as likely to be stopped and searched by the Germans.



# “Cover Stories”

Women were sometimes able to gather information while working seemingly routine office jobs.

Others though sought out covers for their clandestine work. **Jeannie Rousseau** worked for a group charged with helping French industrialists collaborate with the Germans. She **became an interpreter** for those negotiating contracts and, as such, was able to gather information about a secret weapons program. Jeannie was captured, deported and survived three concentration camps.

While her work has been deemed brilliant, years after the war, Rousseau remarked:

*“It is not easy to depict the lonesomeness, the chilling fear, the unending waiting, the frustration of not knowing whether the dangerously obtained information would be...passed on in time or recognized as vital in the maze of intelligence mail.”*

(Rossiter, Women in the Resistance, p. 131).

# The roles of women in the French Resistance: *Information and Communication*



Once couriers delivered the information, **encoding** became necessary. Many women were employed in the often tedious task of encoding messages- often from 80 to 120 groups of letters.

Codes often grouped letters in fives.

Some messages needed to be **translated** into French or English and this task most often fell to women.

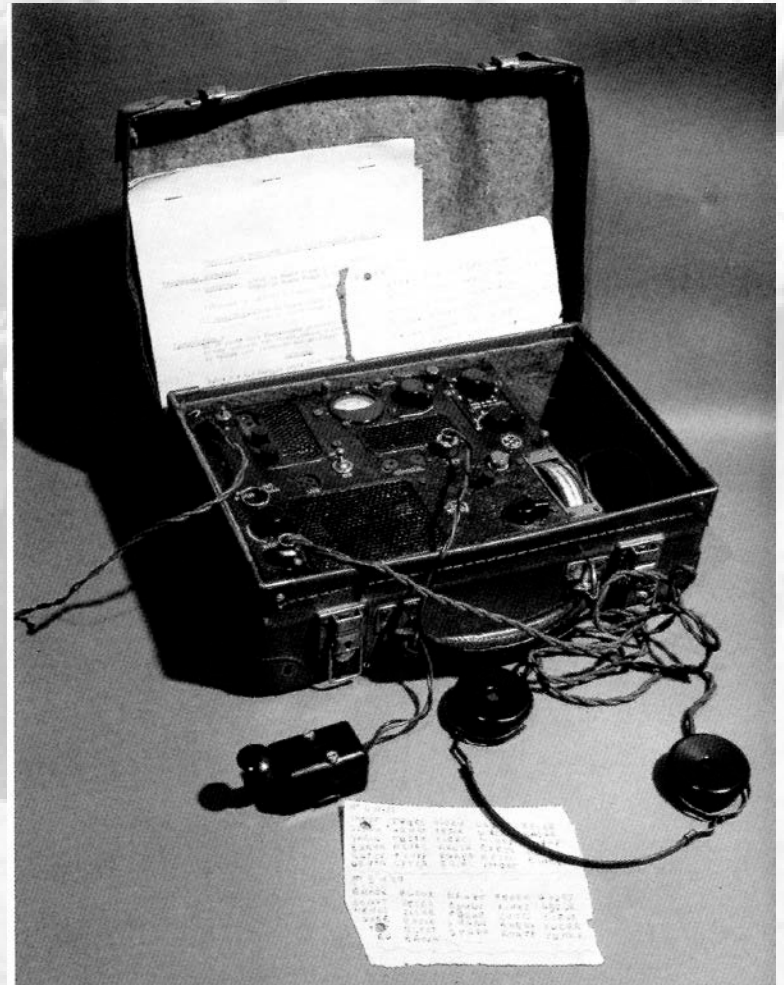
**Intelligence reports** also needed to be processed and this work went to the heads of operations.



# Telegraph Operation

**The Germans arrested a higher percentage of telegraph operators than any other workers in the resistance.**

While the operators took great precautions, the Gestapo was often able to pick up clandestine broadcasts, cut off the electricity to various sections of the city, and determine when the illicit broadcasting ceased. Knowing the general location of the transmission, the Gestapo was then able to locate the site of the broadcast and arrest operators.



Clandestine radio transmitter used in the north of France in 1942

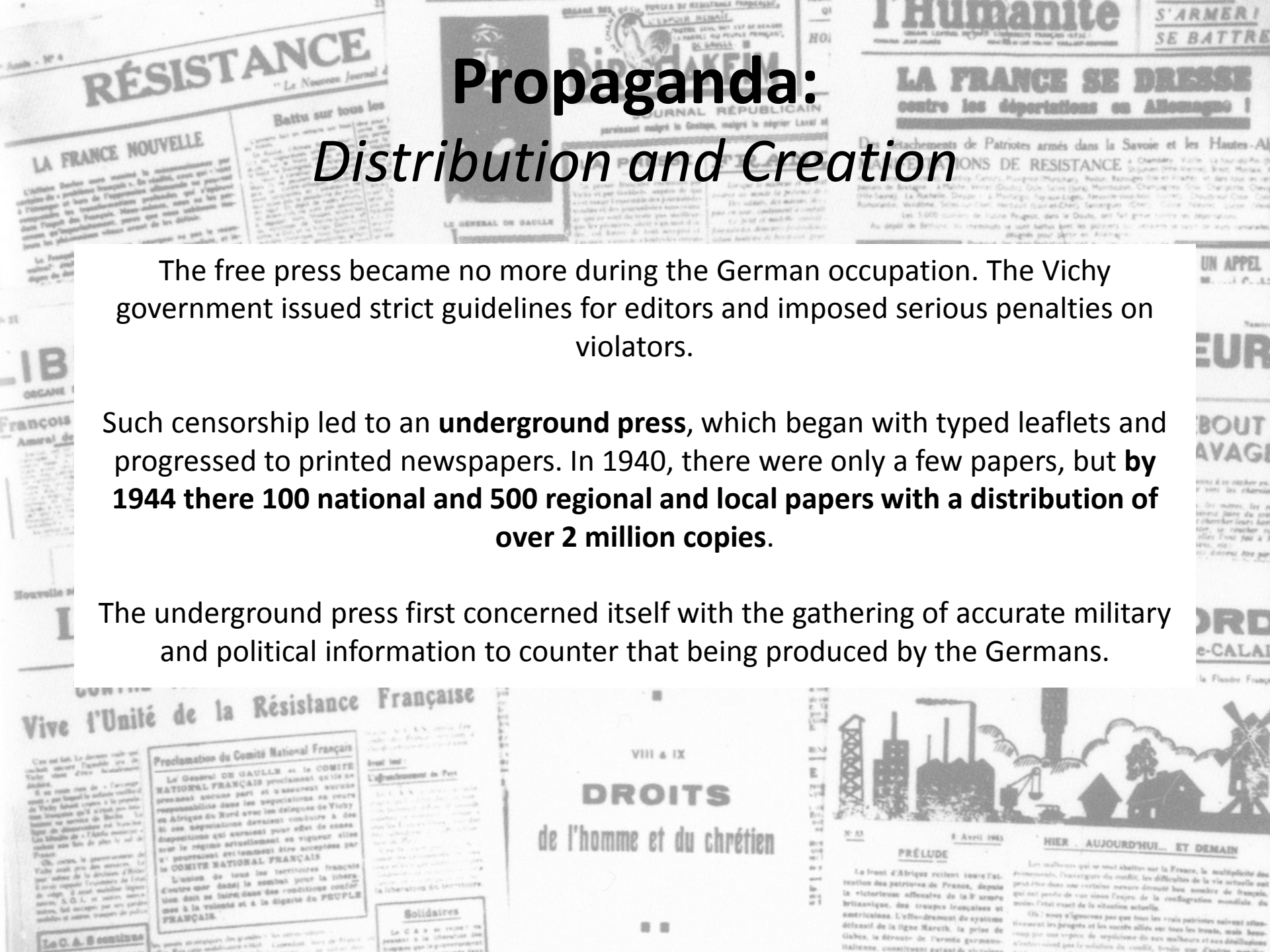


# Propaganda: *Distribution and Creation*

The free press became no more during the German occupation. The Vichy government issued strict guidelines for editors and imposed serious penalties on violators.

Such censorship led to an **underground press**, which began with typed leaflets and progressed to printed newspapers. In 1940, there were only a few papers, but **by 1944 there 100 national and 500 regional and local papers with a distribution of over 2 million copies.**

The underground press first concerned itself with the gathering of accurate military and political information to counter that being produced by the Germans.





# The Press

Underground newspapers also served as **recruitment tools** for resistance organizations.

The second role of the underground press was **propaganda**. In addition to denouncing the Germans and later the Vichy government, the newspapers recanted specific stories or provided different versions of events from that presented in the controlled media. The papers encouraged demonstrations. Wives and mothers were encouraged to demonstrate for additional food rations.

*“The mere existence of the papers showed dissenters that they were not alone”*

(Rossiter, Women in the Resistance, p. 146)

# RÉSISTANCE

Le Nouveau Journal

## LA FRANCE NOUVELLE

Battu sur tous les fronts...  
L'effort doit être continu...  
15 DÉCEMBRE



# BIR HAKEÏM

JOURNAL RÉPUBLICAIN  
paraissant chaque jour, malgré le régime Vichy et  
LA PRESSE FRANÇAISE  
LES MASQUES!

# LIBÉRATION

ORGANE DES FORCES DE RÉSISTANCE FRANÇAISE  
NOTRE TÂCHE:  
L'insurrection républicaine  
François Darlan  
Amiral de la Flotte  
13 DÉCEMBRE

# Combat

Le seul combat: POUR NOS LIBERTÉS  
LE PEUPLE A CHOISI  
ORGANE DES MOUVEMENTS DE RÉSISTANCE UNIS

# LA FRANCE SE DRESSE

contre les déportations en Allemagne!

Des détachements de Patriotes armés dans la Savoie et les Hautes-Alpes...  
MANIFESTATIONS DE RÉSISTANCE...  
Le Salut... UN APPEL

# LE POPULAIRE

ORGANE DU COMITÉ D'ACTION SOCIALISTE  
CONTRE VICHY! CONTRE HITLER!  
Vive l'Unité de la Résistance Française  
Proclamation du Comité National Français  
Le Général DE GAULLE et le COMITÉ NATIONAL FRANÇAIS...  
Solidaires

# CAHIERS

de TÉMOIGNAGE CHRÉTIEN  
VIII & IX  
DROITS  
de l'homme et du chrétien

# LE FRANC-TIREUR

ORGANE DES MOUVEMENTS DE RÉSISTANCE UNIS  
LIBERTÉ - ÉGALITÉ - FRATERNITÉ  
Ils veulent raser un Peuple  
FRANÇAIS! DEBOUT CONTRE L'ESCLAVAGE

# La VOIX du NORD

et du PAS-de-CALAIS  
LIBERTÉ ÉGALITÉ FRATERNITÉ  
PRÉLUDE  
Hier, aujourd'hui... et demain

Montage of Resistance newspapers.

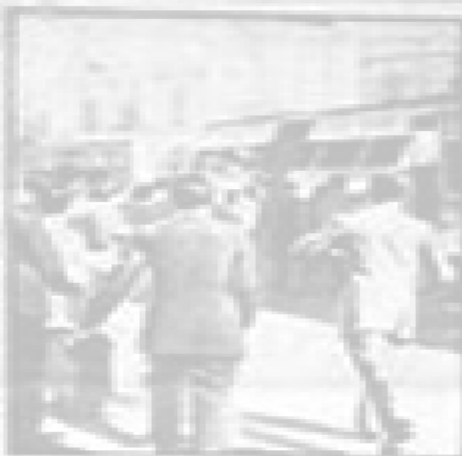
# COMBAT

REVUE DE LA RÉSISTANCE À LA LIBÉRATION  
MÉRIDIONNEL ET NOVEMBRE 1944



## Une guerre non déclarée semble opposer la France et le Viet Nam

### LA BATAILLE CONTINUE DANS HAIPHONG



### LA PRODUCTION de sucre a augmenté de 50 % depuis l'an dernier

Les fabricants annoncent que le sucre  
industriel devrait pousser dans toutes  
les usines à un rythme de 1947

**Combat** is most often associated with **Albert**

**Camus**. However, Camus only joined *Combat* in 1943 and published a total of 165 entries between 1944 and 1947.

**Henri Frenay** was the founder of *Combat*.

The chief of staff of the newspaper was **Bertie Albrecht**.





Communications:

# Bertie Albrecht



Bertie Albrecht was petite, outgoing and married with two children. With a zest for life and a strong willed personality, she was ***responsible for setting up a social service to aid those captured and imprisoned.*** This service became a model for other such organizations.

After once escaping from imprisonment, Bertie was again captured in May 1943 in a trap meant for her boss, Frenay. She died on May 28, 1943.





# *Femmes Francaises*

*Femmes Francaises* was issued by the *Union des Femmes Francaises*. On July 14th (Bastille Day) 1944, women were instructed to place red, white and blue flowers on war monuments and then to march to the prefectures demanding bread. Such activities helped to undermine the Germans.



# Women in the Press



Women had many roles in the press— from the gathering of news to the actual printing and distribution of the newspapers and leaflets. They created propaganda, calls to action and described their visions for a postwar France.

Not many women had been editors or writers for newspapers prior to the war. However, they were well represented during the Occupation.

Many of the women were well educated and often Communist or radical in their views.



# The roles of women in the French Resistance: *On the Front Line*

Women worked side by side with men building barricades, derailing trains, blowing up bridges, cutting telephone lines, and slowing factory production. They ambushed and attacked German troops. These and other works of protection and destruction earned them new respect.



*Activism:*

# ***Danielle Casanova***



- Communist,
- Studied dentistry.
- At the age of 27, she organized and led the Jeunes Filles de France.
- She firmly believed that the best way to emancipate women was to show them how to lead themselves. To this end, she trained women to run their own organizations.
- Organizing small groups of partisan fighters, Casanova set about to shoot German soldiers. When a young cadet was shot and killed, Casanova was arrested as a reprisal. She was deported to Auschwitz where she died of typhus in May 1943.



# Cult of Joan of Arc



Much use was made of the image of Joan of Arc during the Vichy years.

To the collaborators, Joan of Arc represented ***patriotism and sacrifice.***

To the Germans, she was the ideal historic figure who, after all, denoted the ***English as the enemy*** of France.

To the resisters, as well as the Communists, she represented the ***warrior, the patriot, the liberator, and the one who refused defeat.***



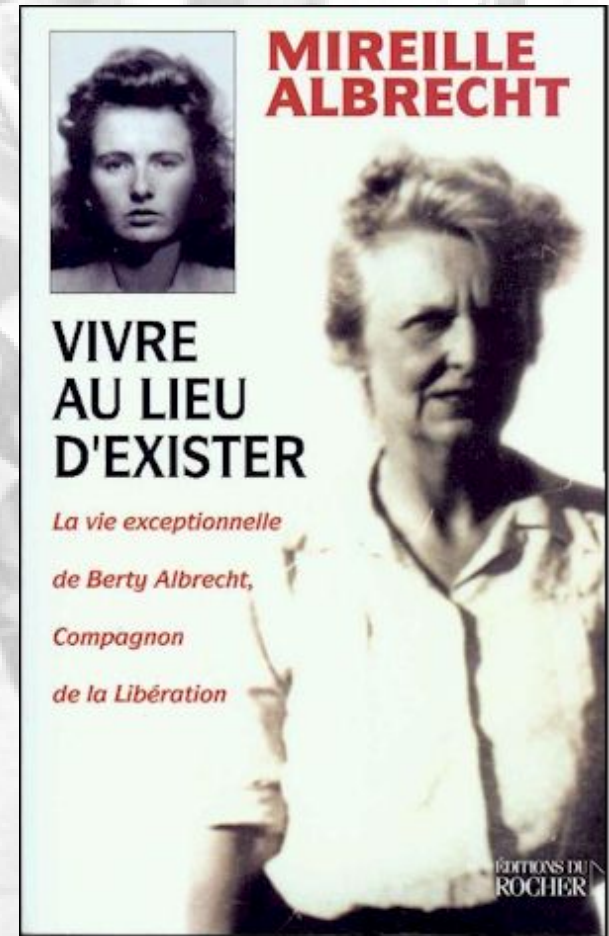
# *Children of the Resistance:* ***Writers of the Next Generation***

The Resistance and the work of the women involved had a great deal of impact on their children, one of whom was ***Mireille Albrecht***.

Images of the Resistance in text often deliberately emphasize the less heroic and more troubling aspects of the clandestine lifestyle.

*“The main aim of Mireille Albrecht’s narrative is to move beyond simplistic representations of her mother as the epitome of honorable resistance. The emphasis is on contextualizing Berty’s clandestine activities and her political activism...Albrecht embarks on a journey which represents her mother’s involvement in the Resistance as the culmination of a life-long political commitment to championing the rights of women and the working classes.”*

*(Gorrara, Women’s Representations of the Occupation in Post-’68 France, p.84-5)*



# The Liberation

*August 25, 1944*



# Conclusion



There is ample evidence that the role women played in the Resistance helped to secure the right to vote which was granted in 1944.



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