

From Pétain to Macron, from the Resistance to the Yellow Vests...: 1944-1945, France's Fake Purge of "The Collaborators"

A comment on a new book by historian Annie Lacroix-Riz, *La Non-épuration en France de 1943 aux années 1950* (Armand Colin, Paris, 2019)

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*In her most recent book, *La Non-épuration en France de 1943 aux années 1950* ("France's Non-Purge from 1943 to the 1950s"), historian Annie Lacroix-Riz challenges a view of the Liberation of the country in 1944-1945 - and its aftermath - that has been trending recently in a historiography increasingly dominated by the right wing of the political spectrum ("droitisée"). This vision is highly critical of the Resistance and, conversely, rather indulgent with respect to collaboration. It is claimed, for instance, that the Resistance was generally ineffective, so that France owed its liberation almost exclusively to the efforts of the Americans and other Western Allies - the latter seconded by de Gaulle's "Free French" forces - who landed in Normandy in June, 1944. Furthermore, we are told that the Resistance seized upon the opportunity presented by the liberation to commit all sorts of atrocities, including murder and the public shaving of the heads of innocent young women who had committed "horizontal collaboration," that is, had love affairs with German soldiers. This "wild purge" (épuration sauvage) of the collaborators supposedly amounted to a "terreur communiste," orchestrated by the communists, real or fake members of the Resistance, in an attempt to achieve sinister revolutionary objectives.*

Except for the most blatant cases, the collaborators are now presented by the "dominant historiography" as mostly decent, respectable, well-meaning and "upstanding citizens" (*gens très bien*, an expression borrowed from the title of a novel by Alexandre Jardin), victims of coercion by the Germans, powerless and therefore innocent "subordinates" (*subalternes*), caught helplessly between the Nazi Scylla and the Charybdis of the Resistance, and often themselves involved in secret acts of resistance. Some collaborators were fanatics, of course, and did commit crimes, but they were mostly lower-class villains, best exemplified by members of the Vichy regime's infamous paramilitary organization, the Milice.

In 1944-1945, the French provisional government, led by General de Gaulle, eventually managed to restore "law and order." This, supposedly, is how in France, after years of economic and political troubles, military defeat, German occupation, and the turmoil of the Liberation, a law-abiding state, a Gaullist *État de droit*, was born. Even so, an inevitable purge of real and imaginary collaborators took place, which claimed many innocent victims, especially in the higher ranks of the state bureaucracy, the *crème de la crème* of business, and the nation's elite in general.

Lacroix-Riz demolishes this revisionist interpretation in her new opus, which is thoroughly

researched and documented and also full of names of personalities obscure as well as important, making it a somewhat challenging read for those who are not familiar with the history of France in the Second World War. In her earlier books, such as *Le choix de la défaite* and *De Munich à Vichy*, she first explained how, in the spring of 1940, France's political, military, and economic elite had delivered the country to the Nazis in order to be able to install a fascist regime; such an authoritarian system of government was expected to be more sensitive to its needs and wants than the pre-war system of the "Third Republic," deemed overly indulgent towards the working class, especially under the "Popular Front" government of 1936-1937. And she followed up with other meticulously researched studies (*Industriels et banquiers français sous l'Occupation* and *Les élites françaises, 1940-1944. De la collaboration avec l'Allemagne à l'alliance américaine*) that show how that elite had prospered under the auspices of Marshal Pétain's Vichy regime, collaborated eagerly with the Germans, and fought tooth and nail against a Resistance that was mostly working-class, communist-dominated, and bent on introducing radical, even revolutionary changes after the war. Now she demonstrates that the Liberation was not accompanied by a thorough purge of the collaborators but, *au contraire*, that the "*gens très bien*" of France's elite of state and business managed to avoid atoning for their collaborationist sins, and that much of the Vichy system that had served them so well from 1940 to 1944 remained in place - arguably until the present time.

Let us start with the so-called "wild purge," the alleged victimization of innocent folks by communist partisans, or communists posing as partisans, presumably in an attempt to eliminate opponents and rivals in preparation for a revolutionary coup d'état. Lacroix-Rix demonstrates that assassinations and summary executions did take place, but mostly in the context of the bitter fighting that erupted already before the landings in Normandy and the liberation of Paris. Contrary to the theory of its military inefficiency, the Resistance disrupted the enemy's preparations for a defense against allied landings that were to come in Normandy, and caused heavy casualties, as German authorities themselves admitted. And most of the atrocities perpetrated in the context of that form of *warfare* were not the work of the partisans but of the Nazis and of collaborators, especially the Milice, for example the execution of hostages and the infamous massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane. The Resistance fighters, on the other hand, did not target innocent victims but went after German soldiers and particularly odious collaborators, often men whose punishment (including execution) had repeatedly been called for in radio broadcasts by de Gaulle's Free French in England. As for the women whose heads were shaved, many if not most of them were guilty of more heinous activities than mere "horizontal collaboration," for example betrayal of members of the Resistance.

There was no *épuration sauvage* before or during the Liberation, and the allegedly major purge that was to follow the Liberation itself turned out to be a charade. The elite of the French state as well as the private sector had profited handsomely from collaboration and had good reason to fear an advent to power of its enemies in the Resistance. But in the wake of the Liberation, the radicals of the Resistance did not come to power; the elite received little or no punishment for its collaborationist sins; its cherished capitalist social-economic order remained intact (in spite of some reforms); and the elite itself retained most of its power and privileges. For this undeserved blessing, they had to thank the Americans liberators of the once *grande Nation*, as well as **Charles de Gaulle**, the general who aspired to make France great again.

De Gaulle was a genuine patriot, but a conservative man, much devoted to France's

established social and economic order. As for the Americans, destined to succeed the Germans as the masters of Europe, or at least of the western half of the continent, they were determined to make “free enterprise” triumph throughout Europe and to bring the continent into Uncle Sam’s political and economic orbit. This meant preventing all but purely cosmetic political and social-economic changes – regardless of the wishes and aspirations of those who had resisted the Nazis and other fascists, and of the people in general. It also meant forgiveness, protection, and support for collaborators with anti-communist credentials, which is exactly what members of the elite in France had been. In fact, the American authorities had nothing against the Vichy regime and initially hoped to see it subsist after the Germans were chased out of France, either under Pétain or some other Vichy personality, such as Weygand or Darlan, if necessary after a purge of its most rabid pro-German elements and the application of a veneer of democratic varnish. After all, the Vichy system had essentially functioned as the political superstructure of France’s capitalist social-economic system, a system Washington purported to save from the clutches of its left-wing enemies in the Resistance. Conversely, after German setbacks on the Eastern Front, and particularly after the Battle of Stalingrad, countless Vichy collaborators saw the writing on the wall and expected salvation in the form of an “American future” for France or, as Lacroix-Riz likes to put it, by switching from a German to an American “tutor.” Following a liberation by the Americans, they could expect their collaborationist sins and even crimes to be forgiven and forgotten, while the revolutionary or even simply progressive aspirations of the Resistance would be doomed to remain a pipe dream.

The leaders in Washington had no use for de Gaulle; like the Vichyites, they considered him a front for the communists, someone who, if he came to power, would pave the way for a “Bolshevik” takeover, as Kerensky had preceded Lenin during the 1917 Russian Revolution. But gradually they came to realize, as Churchill had already done before them, that it would be impossible to foist a personality associated with Vichy on the French people, and that a government led by de Gaulle happened to be the only alternative to one set up by the communist-dominated, radical reform-minded Resistance. They needed the general to neutralize the communists at the end of the hostilities. De Gaulle himself managed to appease Washington by promising to respect the social-economic status quo; and to guarantee his commitment, countless Vichy collaborators who enjoyed the favours of the Americans were integrated into his Free French movement and even given leading positions. De Gaulle thus morphed into “a right-wing leader,” acceptable to the French elite as well as the Americans, poised to succeed the Germans as “protectors” of the interests of that elite. This is the context in which de Gaulle was rushed to Paris at the time of the city’s liberation in late August 1944. The idea was to prevent the communist-dominated Resistance from attempting to establish a provisional government in the capital. The Americans arranged for de Gaulle to strut down the Champs Elysees as the saviour that patriotic France had been awaiting for four long years. And on October 23, 1944, Washington finally made it official and recognized him as leader of the provisional government of liberated France.

Under the auspices of de Gaulle, France replaced the Vichy system with a new, democratic political superstructure, the “Fourth Republic.” (That system was to be replaced by a more authoritarian, American-style presidential system, the “Fifth Republic,” in 1958.) And the working class, which had suffered so much under the Vichy regime, was treated to a package of benefits including higher wages, paid holidays, health and unemployment insurance, generous pension plans, and other social services; in short, a modest kind of “welfare state.” All these measures benefited from widespread support from wage-earning

plebeians, but were resented by the patricians of the elite, and especially by the employers, the *patronat*. But the elite appreciated that these reforms appeased the working class, thus taking the wind out of the revolutionary sails of the communists, even though these found themselves at the height of their prestige because of their leading role within the Resistance and their association with the Soviet Union, then still widely credited in France as the vanquisher of Nazi Germany.

The women and men of the Resistance were officially elevated to hero status, with monuments erected and streets named in their honor. Conversely, collaborators were officially “purged,” and its most infamous representatives were punished; some of them – for example the sinister Pierre Laval – even received the death penalty, and leading economic collaborators, such as the car manufacturer Renault, were nationalized. But with his provisional government full of recycled Vichyites and Uncle Sam looking over his shoulder, de Gaulle ensured that only the most high-profile bigwigs of the Vichy regime were punished or purged. Many if not most of the collaborationist banks and corporations owed their salvation to an American connection, for example Ford’s French subsidiary. Death sentences were frequently commuted, and Nazi occupation officials (such as Klaus Barbie) and collaborators who had committed major crimes were spirited out of the country to a new life in South or even North America by France’s new American overlords, who appreciated the anti-communist zeal of these men. Countless collaborators got off the hook because they managed to produce fake “Resistance certificates” or suddenly developed diseases that caused their trials to be postponed and eventually dropped. Local officials guilty of working with and for the Germans escaped retribution by being transferred to a city where their collaborationist past was unknown, e.g. from Bordeaux to Dijon. And most of those who were found guilty received only a very light punishment, a mere slap on the wrist. All of this was possible because de Gaulle’s government, and its Ministry of Justice in particular, teemed with unrepented former Vichyites; unsurprisingly, they were what Lacroix-Riz calls “a club of passionate opponents of a purge” (*un club d’anti-épurateurs passionnés*).

While France’s elite had to put up again, as before 1940, with the inconveniences of a democratic parliamentary system, in which plebeians were allowed to provide some input, it managed to remain firmly in control of the post-war French state’s non-elected centres of power, such as the army, the judiciary, and the high ranks of the bureaucracy and the police, centres which it had always monopolized. Vichy generals, for example, mostly known to have been enemies of the Resistance who had conveniently converted to Gaullism, retained control over the armed forces, and countless officials who had been diligent servants of Pétain or the German occupation authorities remained in office and were able to pursue prestigious careers and benefit from promotions and honours. Annie Lacroix-Riz concludes that the supposedly “law-abiding state” of de Gaulle “sabotaged the purge of the [collaborationist] high-ranking officials, thus . . . allowing the survival of a Vichy-hegemony over the French judicial system” – and, one might add, the survival of a Vichy-style system in general.

In 1944-1945, the French elite did not atone for its collaborationist sins, and it was lucky that the revolutionary threat to its capitalist social-economic order, embodied by the Resistance, could be exorcised through the introduction of a system of social security. The bitter wartime class conflict between France’s patricians and plebeians, reflected in the dichotomy of collaboration-resistance, was thus not really terminated, but merely yielded a truce. And that truce was essentially “Gaullist,” since it was concluded under the auspices of

a personality who was conservative enough for the taste of the French elite and its new American “tutors,” but whose sterling patriotism endeared him to the Resistance and its constituency.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the communist threat, however, the French elite ceased to see the need to maintain the system of social services it had only adopted reluctantly. 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 *de facto* adoption by the European Union of neoliberalism, an ideology advocating a return to unfettered laissez-faire capitalism *à l'américaine*. Thus was restarted the class warfare that had pitted collaboration against the Resistance during World War II. It is in this context that French historiography became increasingly dominated by a revisionism that is critical of the Resistance and indulgent with respect to collaboration and even fascism itself. Annie Lacroix-Riz’s book provides a much-needed antidote to this falsification of history. Let us hope that other historians will follow her example and investigate to what extent fascists and collaborators have been rehabilitated, and the anti-fascist Resistance been denigrated, by revisionist historiography – and by right-wing politicians – in other European countries, for instance Italy and Belgium.

A final remark is in order. Macron seeks to destroy a welfare state that was introduced in the wake of the Liberation to avoid revolutionary changes advocated by the communist-led Resistance. He is playing with fire. Indeed, by attempting to liquidate social services that limit, but do not prevent, capital accumulation and are thus essentially only a nuisance to the established social-economic order, he is removing a major obstacle to revolution, a genuine existential threat to that order. His offensive has triggered massive resistance, that of the “Yellow Vests.” This motley crew is admittedly not led by a communist vanguard like the wartime Resistance, but certainly seems to have a revolutionary potential. The conflict between a president who represents the French elite and its American tutors and is in many ways the heir to Pétain, and, on the other hand, the *gilets jaunes* who represent the disgruntled, restless plebeian masses yearning for change, heirs to the wartime partisans, may yet cause France to experience something it escaped at the time of the Liberation: a revolution – and a real, rather than a fake, *épuration*.

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