

[Chatzitheodorou on Halbrook. Gun Control in Nazi Occupied-France: Tyranny and Resistance. Oakland: Independent Institute, 2018. 256 pp. \\$28.95 \(cloth\), ISBN 978-1-59813-307-3.](#)

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Chatzitheodorou on Halbrook, 'Gun Control in Nazi Occupied-France: Tyranny and Resistance'

Stephen P. Halbrook. *Gun Control in Nazi Occupied-France: Tyranny and Resistance.* Oakland:

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Stephen Halbrook's book delves into a largely unresearched topic related to the lack of guns during the French resistance. His research, based both on primary and secondary sources, aims at showing how the registration laws prior to the occupation further complicated the availability of arms for resistance movements during the war. The book uses as a starting point the year 1935 when Prime Minister Pierre Laval issued a decree imposing firearm registration. This decree was a result of the increased violence between political factions during the Third Republic and aimed at minimizing the possibility of political upheaval. The registration included "one's name, date and place of birth, profession, domicile along with a description of the firearm" (p. 24). Halbrook, based on primary sources, argues that few abided by the law decree of 1935. However, as the author mentions, his focus on the region of Ardennes regarding compliance to the 1935 degree cannot provide a full picture of how many people complied with the law in regions other than Ardennes, a rural area with plenty of hunters. Compliance in urban areas would have been a study on its own and may have led to different results.

By 1939, the French were not allowed to bear (war) arms, while the ones with permission were supposed to register their guns with the police, with some exceptions (i.e., "guns of sentimental value," p. 34). The author demonstrates how the registration of arms to prevent street violence between political groups facilitated the repression of gun owners during the occupation and made it more difficult for potential resisters to acquire arms during the resistance: the registration of arms

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proved useful to the German occupiers the following year when they asked civilians to surrender their arms. Halbrook provides information on the number of surrendered arms while also highlighting the constraints of such an approach; indeed, the real number of guns remains a matter of conjecture. Halbrook demonstrates that the majority of the French did not actually surrender their hunting guns; from three million guns, only 715,000 were surrendered in the occupied zone between 1940 and 1941 (p. 203). As he mentions, French hunters did not take the threat of the death penalty seriously, probably thinking that they would not be detected since hunting guns were not registered based on the 1935 law. Besides, in the early period of the occupation, when the wound of “defeat” was still fresh and resistance was primarily symbolic, death sentences for the mere possession of a firearm were not automatic.

Halbrook provides the several decrees issued during the occupation and demonstrates how the occupying forces faced difficulties in making the French surrender their weapons. Even though a considerable number of arms were surrendered, many more were hidden, “often buried in yards” (p. 48), or they were never surrendered. Many French hid guns in places where the Germans would not look for them and, as a respondent to a questionnaire mentioned, “maybe with the hope that one day it would serve a good cause” (p. 66). Once resistance became more active and organized, the need for guns and ammunition also increased. Halbrook provides insights into this through personal memoirs by former resisters; for example, Guillain de Benouville highlighted the need for firearms not to attack but rather to defend oneself as they carried out their functions (i.e., carrying and transferring secret documents). The leaders of the interior resistance in France also highlighted the need for financing and arms. Both Jean Moulin and Henri Frenay approached Charles de Gaulle and the Allies to provide the French resistance with arms.

Once resistance activities increased, so did the reprisals: as the “shadow army” of *résistants* rose over France, death sentences became more and more common. In the decree of March 5, the duty to denounce whoever hid guns did not apply to “spouses, parents, children or siblings of such people” (p. 136).[1] The March 5 decree became a testament to the success of the gun control policy in occupied France;[2] yet, two years of similar decrees had failed since countless people kept ignoring the orders. Contrary to the wishes of the occupying forces, by the time the decree of March 5 came into effect, members of the resistance were focusing on acquiring, rather than surrendering guns. Henri Tanguy’s gun, for example, was taken from a German soldier by a resistance fighter. It was handed over to Henri Rol-Tanguy. His gun is on display at the Paris Liberation Museum-General Leclerc Museum-Jean Moulin Museum in Paris. By 1942, when the SS took over in France and the resistance movement started growing, collective responsibility was announced; the relatives of resistance fighters were to either be shot (male relatives over eighteen), sentenced to hard labor (women relatives), or sent to reform school (children under eighteen) (p. 154).

The author uses a variety of sources to demonstrate the general feeling of the population toward gun prohibition after France’s defeat. Particularly interesting are the responses he received from ex-resistance members that mention that only “cowards complied” (p. 49). The author is right to point out the bias behind these responses since the ones who responded had taken a more active part in the resistance. Nevertheless, the *résistants* were a minority, and therefore, their bias on the matter cannot represent the whole spectrum of French society, particularly in the early days of the occupation. Indeed, to provide social harmony after the war, the French created a fundamental myth of the *résistance française*. This was not a work of fiction about something that never occurred, but

rather a tale that fit the needs of France in the postwar era. This postwar narrative framed the resistance as a continuous thread of opposition, placing the starting point at June 18, 1940, when a largely unknown De Gaulle issued his command to resist over the BBC from London and reaching a peak on August 26, 1944, when he marched through the Champs-Élysées. A second parameter of this myth concerned the support of the population: the resistance was supported by most of the population from the very beginning, while only a small minority collaborated with the Nazis.[3] However, and as Louis Chazai beautifully highlights in one of his poems from 1940—*Et la foule immense obeit [and the huge crowd obeys]!*—the majority of French people in the early days of occupation obeyed the German occupation laws and did not think of “resisting.”[4] Many French chose passivity over resistance, a choice which also resonated with the shock of defeat and the developments on the battlefield, as the Axis seemed undefeated. This would eventually change along with the victories of the Allies on the conventional front, especially after the Soviet victory in the Battle of Stalingrad; the Soviet victory was vivid proof that the Axis was not undefeatable, which provided the occupied countries with hope and courage to open a second front, by resisting.

The growth of the resistance movements and the maquis were also a result of Laval’s decision to sign the law that created the Service du travail obligatoire (STO), according to which all males between eighteen to twenty were to be sent to Germany as forced laborers. To avoid being sent to Germany, many men joined the maquis and began a guerrilla campaign that would prove important as a second battlefield later, in the Battle of France in 1944, with hit-and-run acts of sabotage against German vehicles and railways. For instance, after the Normandy landings in June 1944, maquis in the Vencors, Mont Mouchet, and Limousin attacked Wehrmacht divisions and supplementary sabotage of railways took place. More importantly, Laval’s signature led to increased support for the resistance groups. What started as unorganized resistance by a small minority started to become more collective and organized with the support of the general population.

An interesting point made by Halbrook concerns the different shades related to notions of resistance and collaboration. Halbrook demonstrates that resistance and collaboration were not black-and-white; rather, while a small minority engaged in resistance activities, a larger number of French contributed by small acts of disobedience. For instance, as he mentions, the French police collaborated well with the occupying forces. However, “patriotic French police tried to divert and hide arms that were turned in, for future use against the Germans” (p. 127). This grey area becomes even more apparent when one looks at how collaborators saw or defined resistance. This becomes evident from Laval’s statement, “I do not incriminate the real resistance fighters; we are also resistance fighters. There are resisters who attack, and resistance fighters who defend.”[5] Halbrook also illustrates Laval’s point of view regarding his collaboration policy by providing segments from his personal diary. Laval, trying to justify his collaboration with the Nazis, mentions that had he abandoned his post in 1942, the country would have become “one vast maquis” (p. 162). Thousands of French who were not involved in resistance activities would have faced reprisals because of the anarchy that would have followed his resignation. Yet, despite his effort to justify his acts, his collaboration policy only postponed and delayed the Nazi defeat. Equally, when the leader of the combat resistance group, Henri Frenay, met with Pierre Pucheu, the minister of the interior in Marshal Petain’s government, the latter stated, “No one in the government is pro-German. Ministers are trying to make the most of the present situation, without taking public opinion into account but for the greater good of France.... Your position is easy. You play on people’s emotions. It’s a kind of demagogy.”[6] These two statements demonstrate that even collaborators had to justify their

behavior in a patriotic way, where their decisions were taken in the interest of the French people—at least for the sake of their conscience.

Members of the resistance complained about the shortage of arms. These complaints were mostly directed towards the Allies and De Gaulle's reluctance to supply the resisters with guns and ammunition necessary to attack the occupier from the inside. Therefore, the lack of arms was also a result of postwar calculation: it remains undebatable that both the Allies and De Gaulle were reluctant to supply guns to groups that they did not have complete control over, particularly when these groups (i.e., Franc-Tireurs et Partisans) identified with communist and socialist ideals. Postwar calculations were already taking place, and a communist takeover in France was not included on their wish list, which made them reluctant to arm them in the first place. This fear originated prior to the war; as Jonathan Haslam demonstrates in his book *Spectre of War*, many countries had been economically destabilized by the First World War, and the threat of communist revolt loomed large in the ensuing social unrest. As Moscow-backed communist efforts in France, Spain, China, and elsewhere, opponents—such as the British—feared the “spectre of war that was hunting Europe” and saw fascism as the only force standing between them and a communist takeover of the existing order.[7]

Halbrook mentions in chapter 5 of that the Communist Party had been friendly to Nazi Germany as a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. Yet this is a rather simplistic interpretation of events. The anti-fascist stance of the French communists was indeed derailed by the 1939 pact. Once the pact was signed, the official communist line blamed capitalist and imperial powers for the war. The rank and file of the Communist Party were taken by surprise and thrown into confusion, which had an impact in their reaction to the occupiers in the early days of occupation. Some communist individuals, however, staying faithful to their ideals and refusing to compromise them, took a more active stance against the war and occupation. In August 1940, Henri Tanguy returned to Paris and sought out his metalworking companions, becoming engaged in the *comités populaires* with his wife, Cécile, who printed leaflets and worked as his liaison agent. In the same pattern, Albert Ouzoulias, a Communist Youth leader, escaped from a prisoner-of-war (POW) camp in Germany in July 1941 by stowing himself under a train conveying POWs freed as veterans of the 1914-18 war back to France and returned to Paris to organize resistance.[8]

This uncomfortable situation came to an end with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, giving the communists their *raison d'être* and their chance for catharsis to throw off the shadow of the pact. The communists Gilbert Brustlein and Guisco Spartaco shot two officers, one of whom was killed by Brustlein's fire. The officer was the Feldkommandant of Nantes, Lieutenant Colonel Karl Friedrich Hotz. Hitler wanted as many as 150 prisoners executed, yet Otto von Stülpnagel, fearing that extensive repression would lead to resentment and benefit the resistance, urged him to give the police collaborators a chance to find those responsible for the killing. In a notice issued on October 21, 1941, a reward was offered to French inhabitants who contributed to the arrest of the killers. The author provides some information, although limited, on popular reaction to the killing of the Feldkommandant, by citing *Le Matin*. The newspaper justified the execution of forty-eight prisoners as “the law of war” (p. 113). However, digging deeper into that “general feeling” of the population toward the execution of prisoners as a reprisal to the killing by using newspapers from the whole political spectrum would have been interesting to see; for instance, *La Bretagne ouvrière, paysanne et maritime*, affiliated with the Communist Party of France, declared with respect to the execution of

hostages, “it is with hearts ulcerated with pain and clenched fists that the people of Nantes and all the population of the department have learned of the odd massacre of 48 of the best fighters and leaders of the struggle for the liberation of the French people.”[9]

In sum, Halbrook’s book provides interesting insight in a largely under-researched topic related to the French resistance. However, it remains crucial to note that the lack of arms was less a result of the 1935 decree than a reflection of Allied reluctance to provide communist resistance movements with guns and ammunition, fearing a communist takeover in France and elsewhere after the war. Given that communist resistance movements emerged as the largest force in several countries, including France, postwar calculations played an important role in determining the distribution of guns, and the communists were not seen as the best candidates to bear arms.

Notes

[1]. This was a result of family members denouncing other family members they did not like.

[2]. After the landing of the Allies in North Africa on November 8, 1942, the whole French territory came under German occupation.

[3]. Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows: A New History of the French Resistance* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 2-4.

[4]. Louis Chazai, “Et la foule immense obeit,” in *Les années maudites: 1940-1945 Poemes de la guerre et de la resistance* (Paris: Perret-Gentil, 1971), 31-32.

[5]. Gordon Wright, “Reflections on the French Resistance (1940-1944),” *Political Science Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 1962): 336-349; quotation on 338n6.

[6]. Cited in Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows*, 102-3.

[7]. For more, see Jonathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[8]. Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows*, 84-87.

[9]. “Une crime monstrueux,” *La Bretagne ouvrière, paysanne et maritime: édition spéciale de la Loire-Inférieure*, November 19, 1941, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Réserve des livres rares, RES-G-1470 (494), accessed November 10, 2022, Gallica, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32715966p>.

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