



Simon Kitson, *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis, 1940-1942: complexités de la politique de collaboration*. Éditions Autrement, Collection Mémoires no. 110, 2005. 268 pp., index, bibliography, ISSN: 1157-4488; ISBN 2-7467- 0588-5.

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In a November 2000 H-Diplo roundtable discussion on the Fall of France in 1940, Canadian scholar Peter Jackson suggested that more attention should be given to the political context of the debate over the causes of France's collapse. At the Riom trials of 1941-42, French conservatives successfully institutionalized the thesis that France's defeat was a consequence of decadence, confusion and bewilderment sown by the divisive, left-wing policies of the Third Republic. While this politicized view of France's fall has been contested by both French and "Anglo-Saxon" scholars, Jackson observes, it remains resilient none-the-less. Of course, decadence is an old theme in French political literature, present at least since 1871 when it was employed to explain the debacle of the Second Empire. It was an argument whose value was instantly recognized by an upstart Gaullist movement whose rhetoric, Jackson points out, "was based largely on interpreting French history as a continuous cycle of decline, suffering and renewal." [1]

The literature on French intelligence before and during World War II has conformed to this pattern. The purpose of intelligence is to inform policy and provide the basic information to guide strategy. In the post-war years, a number of former members of the Deuxième Bureau published histories and memoirs of the period which sought to prove just that. In the process, they aimed to absolve French intelligence of responsibility for the 1940 defeat, and to demonstrate that the French government had more than adequate information to allow them to prepare successfully to counter the German threat, [2] a verdict that has received the general support of historians. [3] Paul Paillole, an ex-Deuxième bureau officer who emerged as the doyen of intelligence apologists, underlined the role of French intelligence as midwife to the breaking of the enigma codes, and even claimed that the Deuxième bureau passed on information predicting the German Ardennes offensive of May 1940. [4] Therefore, the general charge of "decadence" leveled at the Third Republic, Paillole's argument goes, cannot be extended to French military intelligence which offered a professional, focused product capable of saving France had it been folded properly into the decision-making process.

In my 1995 book, *The French Secret Services*, I argued that Paillole's analysis, while it did demonstrate the undeniable success of French intelligence in helping to break the enigma codes, overly simplified the relationship between decision-makers and intelligence professionals. In fact, the process of how intelligence is incorporated into the decision-making process is simply too complex to be reduced to a formula of correct information fed to unwilling listeners entangled in an atmosphere of "decadence" and indecision. Rather, French intelligence tended to support pre-war policies and strategies rather than challenge them. Intelligence professionals, eager to preserve their influence with decision-makers, will seldom challenge the intellectual construct upon which defense policies and strategies are based. France faced the unappealing prospect in 1940 of standing up to overwhelming German power. Intelligence, even good intelligence – especially good intelligence – which pointed this out was likely to demoralize French decision-makers and encourage the adoption of high risk strategic options anchored in wishful thinking rather than in reality.[5]

The "decadence" perspective becomes more problematic as a framework to justify actions of these intelligence professionals who overwhelmingly opted to serve Vichy. Having attempted to distance themselves from the failures of the Third Republic, Paillole and others attempted to disassociate themselves from the collaborationist policies of Vichy, arguing that they assiduously worked to protect France from German penetration under the protection of the War and Air ministries, and of General Maxime Weygand, all opposed to the diehard collaborationists in Vichy. At the same time, their professionalism is held up as a bulwark against the emergence of a new type of "decadence" as represented by the opportunism and amateurism of the resistance, especially of the Gaullists.

Again, this is to oversimplify the interaction of Vichy intelligence agencies, the Vichy regime, and the resistance during the first two and a half years of the occupation. As Kitson's excellent work points out, Vichy policy was anchored in an unresolvable paradox: Vichy had to collaborate with the German occupiers to preserve its independence. The argument of Paillole and others was that their *Service de Renseignements*, reorganized into agencies like the *Bureau des menées anti-nationales* and the quaintly transparent *Travaux ruraux*, together with counter-intelligence organizations in the three services, was a "resistance" to protect the sovereignty of the French state, to curtail German penetration of the administration and give Vichy as large a margin of maneuver as possible under the circumstances of the occupation. And to be fair to the SR, it never revealed to the Germans that the allies had replicated the enigma machine. Instead, it buried its remaining enigma replicas in the south of France for the remainder of the war.

The "defensive mission" of the SR, however, also required the simultaneous containment of *ad hoc* "resistance" organizations made up of a hodgepodge of enthusiastic but nefarious communists, idealists, and adventurers promoted by the British Intelligence Service and by Charles de Gaulle's London-based BCRA. As Kitson points out, these veterans of military intelligence were especially contemptuous of the BCRA, which they regarded as hardly more than a "Renseignements Généraux Politique." [6] In their view, the Gaullists were unprofessional, politicized, and penetrated by the Germans, while their mere presence shattered French unity, a requirement if the depredations of the German occupation were to be resisted.

One of the great values of Kitson's book, which focuses only on the period between the June 1940 armistice and the German occupation of Vichy's cosmetic *zone libre* in November 1942, is to blow the Vichy SR's "resistance" argument out of the water. The SR was not "resisting" in opposition to Vichy collaboration. Vichy's goal, operationalized by its SR, was "a policy of the defense of sovereignty and the centralization of collaboration." (198) In other words, the SR was an essential component of collaboration. The SR's mission was to bolster Vichy "independence" by preventing German penetration, and shield it, in the words of General Maxime Weygand, from "des pretentions des allemands." (174) But when there was a conflict, collaboration usually won out. (101) The officers of the SR liked Vichy's policies of internal repression and "renewal." But they were increasingly disenchanted with Vichy's external policies, Kitson relates, because these made it progressively more difficult for them to do their job. The problem for the SR was that it was impossible to be simultaneously pro-Vichy and anti-German. The Gaullists understood that Berlin simply permitted Vichy the temporary illusion of sovereignty so as better to manipulate it. The SR's reluctance to face the strategic reality of France's asymmetric disadvantage vis-à-vis Germany meant that their strategy of a "defensive mission" to protect Vichy "neutrality" looked increasingly threadbare as German pressure mounted, and collapsed completely with the occupation of the *zone libre* in November 1942. In the process, this made a mockery of the SR's contention that the Gaullists were a "political" service, while theirs was purely "professional." The SR was promoting a political movement as much as were the Gaullists. The difference was that the BCRA put time on its side by taking the offensive as part of the Alliance, instead of going on the defensive in support of an untenable "neutralist" vision of France that was constantly mocked by Nazi actions, and the requirements of Vichy collaboration.

If the SR's strategy was untenable, their operational problems were at least as significant. The SR prided itself on its professionalism. However, a lack of resources and personnel, the absence of cooperation from other ministries and the police, the belief on the part of many Frenchmen that Vichy's collaborationist policies were *carte blanche* to spy for the Germans, and German intervention to liberate their more important collaborators, created an atmosphere of mission impossible. In the end, all SR "professionalism" managed to accomplish was to arrest a couple of thousand Frenchmen spying for the Germans, as well as Gaullists and IS resisters, and even torture and executed some of them. But most were small fish who lacked the connections to escape. With the end of the illusion of Vichy sovereignty in November 1942, many of these professionals decamped to North Africa, where they offered their services to the American-backed General Giraud, another example of a man who had to collaborate, this time with the Americans, to gain his independence. Unfortunately for the ex-SR men, "collaboration" worked no better this time in the face of a Gaullist challenge to Giraud's authority, than it had during Vichy.

So, in the end, the Vichy SR might be said to have inaugurated at least two trends in modern French intelligence. First, despite all the SR's claims of "professionalism," ultimately it was as politicized as the BCRA, but without the Gaullist capacity to organize a true "resistance" in support of a coherent political movement. The SR had the negative purpose of defending Vichy's unrealistic and increasingly discredited domestic and foreign policies. So, therefore, the war years advanced the view in intelligence circles that loyalty to a regime superseded the

requirement of a detached, objective service dedicated to furthering French strategic interests by informing policy.

A second consequence of the war years, one confirmed by the post-1945 colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria, was the operationalization of French intelligence. Vichy was a harbinger of a new world for France, one in which its influence would become increasingly marginalized, whose pretensions to global influence increasingly outdistanced its capabilities. To compensate, French leaders were tempted to turn to intelligence services to provide tactical solutions to intractable strategic problems caused by failed policy or national weakness. French intelligence under Vichy was not used to inform a policy that was totally untenable in any case. Rather, its mission was to carry it out. This, alas, was to become a pattern for the future of French intelligence – regime relations.

Notes:

[1] H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online; H-Diplo Roundtable discussion of Joel Blatt, (ed), *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments*, (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/>, 9.

[2] Among them are: General Maurice Gauché, *Le Deuxième Bureau au travail (1935-1940)*, (Paris: Dumont, 1953); Paul Stehlin, *Témoignage pour 'histoire*, (Paris: Laffont, 1964); Paul Paillole, *Services spéciaux 1935-1945*, (Paris: Laffont, 1975) and *Notre espion chez Hitler*, (Paris: Laffont, 1985); Henri Navarre, *Le Service de renseignements, 1871-1944*, (Paris: Plon, 1978).

[3] See Walter Laqueur, *A World of Secrets: The Uses and Limits of Intelligence*, (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 11; Robert J. Young, "French Military Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1938-1939), in Ernest J. May, ed, *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment Before the Two World Wars*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 280, 287.

[4] Paillole, *Services spéciaux*, 185-86.

[5] Douglas Porch, *The French Secret Services. A History of French Intelligence from the Dreyfus Affair to the Gulf War*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995), 173.

[6] Paul Paillole, *Services spéciaux*, 433 note and interview with the author. The Renseignements Généraux is a section of the French police that amasses personal files on French citizens to be used as the basis of investigation.

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