
Roundtable Editor: Martin C. Thomas, Exeter University

Roundtable Participants: Peter Jackson, University of Wales, Aberystwyth; Sean Kennedy, University of New Brunswick; Kim Munholland, University of Minnesota; Douglas Porch, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School

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Dear reader:

We are pleased to post, in six parts, an H-Diplo roundtable review of Simon Kitson’s *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis, 1940-1942: complexités de la politique de collaboration*. We would like to thank Simon Kitson for agreeing to participate in this review. Doris Audoux at Éditions Autrement greatly facilitated the process. Special mention should be made of our excellent panel of reviewers and especially the roundtable editor, Martin Thomas, who has devoted a considerable amount of time to this project. -- Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo Managing Editor.

Introduction by Martin Thomas, Exeter University

A well-known story that yet remains unknown. Thus Simon Kitson introduces us to his fascinating study of Vichy’s counter-espionage services in France and North Africa prior to Germany’s occupation of the Southern Zone in November 1942. The story he has to tell, its deeper meanings, and the way he tells it are the subjects of this roundtable. Our four reviewers bring a wealth of complementary knowledge to bear in assessing Simon Kitson’s work. Peter Jackson, a regular contributor to this forum, is renowned as a historian of intelligence, foreign policy, and strategic decision-making in pre-war France. Sean Kennedy’s work on the politics and culture of the extreme-right in the late Third Republic equips him well to assess the political context and social milieu in which Vichy’s intelligence activities took place, something he does with clarity in his review. Kim Munholland brings a peerless knowledge of twentieth-century France and its empire to bear in his contribution to the roundtable. And Douglas Porch is well known for his many studies of military history and was among the first historians to investigate the workings of France’s modern secret services. All our reviewers concur that the book breaks new ground, as much in its subtle analysis of where Vichy’s intelligence service fits into continuing debates about collaboration and resistance as in its wealth of new archival findings. It is an opinion shared by our colleagues in France. Published in Autrement’s popular *Collection Mémoires* series to widespread historical and media acclaim in January of this year, Kitson’s book has drawn widespread interest and a measure of controversy. [1] The book’s reception in France offers proof, if any were needed, that arguments over the nature and justifications for state collaboration, to opposition or alignment with the Vichy regime, as well as the numerous points in between, remain as vigorous as ever.
*Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis* is an investigation of how and why state security services hunted Nazi spies—the bulk of them fellow French men and women—on the mainland and in the Maghreb between 1940 and 1942. What its title does not tell us is that this book has a far wider significance than a specialist examination of wartime counter-espionage might imply. Its subjects may be intelligence officers and their targets, but its reach goes much further. For one thing, both sides in this spy versus spy-hunter confrontation were always prone to manipulation, the former by their German recruiters, the latter by the Vichy state. For another, critical personal decisions about whom or whom not to support were often made under intense pressure, even under duress. Whether discussing Vichy’s intelligence services or those they investigated, this is a book about choices made under extreme conditions. In this respect, it is in the very best tradition of Vichy scholarship which, ever since the Paxtonian ‘revolution’ has sought answers to social, political and cultural behaviour in Vichy France ‘shaded in the tones of gray’ between outright accommodation with the German occupation and unequivocal resistance to it.[2] It is a sensitive and nuanced investigation of a cadre of Vichy intelligence officers who, in their overwhelming majority, believed their work was essential to conserve French sovereignty and the maximum political autonomy achievable in domestic and imperial policy. This then was not collaboration, however that most difficult of terms is understood. A constant refrain in Kitson’s work is the resolve with which Vichy’s counter-intelligence service fought to maintain a certain distance from the policies of the government it served. Indeed, as several of the reviewers point out, security service professionals who remained in post after the 1940 defeat were adamant that they made the right choices, that theirs was informed resistance all the more effective because conducted so much closer to the shadowy corridors of Vichy power. Their opinions matter, not only in, and of, themselves, but because several of these individuals wrote detailed memoirs on which historians have long depended for insight into the workings of wartime French intelligence. Kitson’s study, drawing primarily on intelligence service files, offers us another perspective. That said, he makes no claims to be an iconoclast. He is respectful toward his charges, and in no way judgemental of them. As our reviewers agree, this sense of balance only adds weight to his ultimate conclusions. Furthermore, the unknown history that he brings to light is of a determined resistance of sorts: virulently anti-German and anti-collaborationist certainly, and yet institutionally dependent on the survival of a sovereign Vichy authority that operated within the broad parameters of the 1940 armistice.

Kitson does not reject concepts of collaboration or resistance entirely. He succeeds instead in connecting the two, finding their points of intersection and rupture, through a meticulous reconstruction of the attitudinal formation, the institutional setting, and the strategic dilemmas of a distinct bureaucratic community. What makes Vichy’s intelligence service especially interesting as a discrete organisation through which to examine the parameters of collaboration or resistance is its privileged knowledge of state policy and the extent of domestic and foreign opposition to it. The subtext here is of a group of politically astute individuals who did what they did because they knew what they knew. At the risk of straying into the tortured vocabulary of Donald Rumsfeld, Vichy’s counter-espionage professionals concluded from the covert information available to them that the only effective means to contain the threats to France’s national and imperial unity inherent in collaboration was to work within the state system, not outside it. As Peter Jackson and Kim Munholland point out in their reviews, the relative moderation of the Franco-German Armistice terms made it harder still to navigate a path
between acceptance and collaboration or rejection and resistance.

If this often paradoxical situation was not complex enough, Kitson’s reconstruction of intelligence service operations from the fulsome archival records returned to France from Russia after 1994 also illuminates other, enduring pre-occupations among Vichy’s spy-hunters. Some of these come as no surprise. One was a lasting fear of Communism, nurtured in the last years of the Third Republic and reinvigorated by the emergence of Communist-led resistance in France. Another was the profound mistrust toward the Free French movement and its intrusive, if amateurish, intelligence activities. Intense dislike of Gaullist posturing, and politicking in general, was integral to the professional ethos of military intelligence personnel. And so, too, was a pervasive loathing for Britain and its imperialist designs that burnt with stronger intensity after the Vichy-British clashes of 1940-1, from Mers el-Kébir, through Dakar, to Syria. Scholars of inter-war France will surely find traces of the political polarisation of the pre-war years in the outlook of Vichy’s intelligence operatives. Specialists of intelligence history may recognise the patterns of inter-agency rivalry, politicisation, and conflicting institutional pressures that determine the tangible outcomes of intelligence gathering. Historians of empire will perhaps discern the echoes of earlier imperial rivalries between the western powers. These were issues and memories that still mattered to intelligence operatives, many of whom, the former counter-espionage chief Paul Paillolle and a young Raoul Salan among them, spent years of service in colonial postings.[3]

The uniqueness of Kitson’s work lies in the skill with which he weaves these sentiments together with the other, more pressing concerns of Vichy’s spy-hunters: their unremitting hostility to Nazism and their determination to help conserve Vichy’s sovereign control over territory, state security, and citizenry. As a result, Vichy’s counter-espionage network straddled the divides between collaboration and resistance, at once an arm of a collaborating regime and an instrument of anti-German resistance. This intelligence service paradox was, as Douglas Porch reminds us, part of a broader dilemma: ‘Vichy had to collaborate with the German occupiers to preserve its independence.’ As Porch further points out, Kitson’s exploration of motives and action goes deeper still. The military intelligence _service de renseignements_ and its counter-espionage affiliates upheld state control over security policing and were never creatures of the German occupiers. Yet a key objective of their work was to ensure centralised state direction of collaboration with Germany. On this point, all of our reviewers agree. In the eyes of the intelligence service and its institutional masters at Vichy, pro-Nazi spies placed themselves beyond the pale not only because of their politics but because of the challenge they presented to Vichy’s sole direction of contacts with the Nazi regime. Furthermore, the counter-intelligence service was quite prepared to use ruthless methods, including torture and head-shavings, in their search for, and punishment of, those deemed to be feeding information to the Nazis. Although a number of capital sentences were ultimately commuted, the hunt for Nazi spies was often a matter of life or death for those involved.

The theme of political choice - and Kitson’s rejection of any simple polarity between collaboration or resistance, enemy and ally - emerges particularly strongly in the contributions by Peter Jackson and Kim Munholland. Both highlight the importance of Kitson’s argument that to be anti-Nazi was not, by definition, to be pro-ally. Vichy’s intelligence service may have fought the Nazi occupation in its own way behind the scenes, but it did not do so from a position of
covert support for the Anglo-American, still less, the Soviet war effort. Its operating assumption was narrower: that anti-Nazi activity was a patriotic imperative, not part of an inter-allied scheme. Jackson’s fascinating insight into Paul Paillole’s outlook on the past underlines the fact that key figures in the counter-intelligence service expected their work to be judged favourably, and, first and foremost, in terms of French national interest. Certainly, as Sean Kennedy’s thoughtful comments illustrate, the intelligence personnel that traverse the pages of Kitson’s book cannot be accused of clouded judgement. Whereas the spies they hunted emerge as hapless, misguided, and often financially desperate, counter-intelligence staff retained a much clearer sense of purpose. Suspicion of Anglo-Saxon motives, ill-disguised contempt for Free France, even indulgence toward the ‘National Revolution’ was never allowed to blur the primary focus of intelligence work on the detection of pro-Nazi activity. If anything, Kitson’s portrayal of intelligence officers’ political attitudes reveals their prescience about the long-term consequences of collaboration, something that their nominal masters in Vichy so clearly lacked. Fervently anti-communist, sometimes reactionary, the intelligence officers at the heart of Kitson’s book were first and foremost patriots.

In sum, the reviewers find much to praise and little to criticise in _Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis_. While some of the reviews lament the fact that the book does not make more explicit connections between the culture, attitudes and actions of French intelligence services before and after the war, none take issue with the study of Vichy to November 1942 as a discrete period. For one thing, changes to the regime after complete German occupation of France were matched by the loss of control in North Africa. For another, by the winter of 1942 Vichy’s intelligence services were haemorrhaging personnel as many shifted their allegiance to Fighting France. In this changed political and strategic environment, intelligence officers did not face the acute dilemmas about how best to serve the French national interest that were so apparent in the preceding years. As Kim Munholland puts it, ‘the chasse aux espions nazis was effectively over.’ So the case for looking in detail at Vichy counter-espionage in the 1940-42 interlude is a convincing one. And all the roundtable participants are equally persuaded of the lasting importance of what Simon Kitson’s investigation reveals. He has made the wartime history of French intelligence services as central to an understanding of choices in Vichy France as other, better known communities in the regime’s bureaucracy.[4]

Notes:


[3] Raoul Salan, better known for his post-war exploits in Indochina and Algeria, served with the SR Colonial in North and East Africa during the late 1930s.