

World War II: The Unforgotten War

We were reminded of World War II almost every day we lived in France. About halfway down the quay of Guy Môquet Metro Station near our apartment, the former stationmaster's cabin had been converted into a shrine for Guy Môquet, an idealistic seventeen-year-old French youth who had died in front of a German firing squad in 1941. Inside the glass case, photos and posters documented the short life of Guy, who was jailed for protesting against German occupation just months after France was defeated and signed an armistice with Germany. Beside Guy's photo, there was an ancient orange poster written in German and French, denouncing the murder of a German officer who was killed in the same period. That poster warned that one hundred French hostages would be shot if the culprit was not turned in. Another one signed by the head of the Vichy government, World War I hero Maréchal Philippe Pétain, exhorted the French to turn in the culprit and save the lives of innocent French hostages.

Guy was one of the hostages. No one turned in the killer, and as the short text in the display explained, Guy was duly executed, along with twenty-six other hostages from his camp. In an enlarged copy of his farewell letter, Guy begs his mother to "be brave," and in a message carved into a wooden plank, he asks that "those who will die never be forgotten."

As the Guy Moquet display attests, the hostages never were forgotten—but the real story behind their execution was. Over the course of research on the World War II persecution of Jews in France, Jean-Benoît learned that while German soldiers pulled the trigger, the French government edited the list of hostages they executed. The Germans had sent the French a list of one hundred candidates—probably a mix of protesters, resistance fighters, and black marketers—and the French Minister of the Interior removed forty names and replaced them with the names of communists and labor activists. At his trial for war crimes in 1945, the Minister would explain: “I could not let forty good Frenchmen die.”

Six decades have passed since World War II, when a defeated France surrendered to Nazi Germany. Most of the main actors are dead, and as the generation of those who were children is now fading away, the war in France is finally, slowly becoming history. But it's not over yet. The French are still struggling to come to terms with what actually happened.

Up until September 1939, the French, like the British, were doing everything they could to avoid another European war and the millions of casualties it would leave. Like the British, their main fear was the Soviet Union, not Nazi Germany. Watching Germany rise in power and influence, France and Britain were both prone to compromise rather than confront it, so they stood by and watched as the Germans annexed Austria in 1938 and Czechoslovakia in 1938–39. Only in late August 1939, when Germany and the Soviet Union signed a pact of non-aggression and attacked Poland, did Britain and France declare war on Germany. And then, for a year, they did almost nothing.

France's defeat was not long coming. On May 10, 1940, the Germans launched the most brilliant military campaign of all history. The French fought savagely—130,000 died in six weeks, twice the number of American casualties during the Battle of Normandy four years later. The French had one of the biggest armies and good material, but the Franco-British effort suffered from poor coordination of their arms and poor use of modern technology. When it was clear that France was about to lose the battle, a tremendous wave of defeatism overwhelmed the political

and military leaders of the country and some French leaders were ready to sign an armistice as early as May 20.

Not all the French were so quick to give up. A number of members of the government—including a certain deputy secretary of state to war named Charles de Gaulle—proposed evacuating the French government and remnants of the French army to Algeria, and continuing the fight against Germany. Though underused, France's aviation fleet at the time was still strong, and the French navy was the second most powerful in Europe.

The defeatists won, mainly thanks to the reputation of Maréchal Philippe Pétain (1856–1951), a World War I military hero and the most revered Frenchman alive at the time. Pétain was venerated in all French households as the man who had saved France from defeat in the great World War I battle of Verdun (1916–17). Pétain propelled himself to the head of the government by arguing that the French government should remain in France, not go into exile, and most French believed Pétain would be able to make the best of France's defeat and keep the Germans at arm's length.

France signed an armistice with Germany on June 22, and the Germans split the country into four zones. The Germans occupied the northern zones, including all the Atlantic shores, and annexed the zones of Alsatia and Lorraine. Along the Italian border and a southern section of France around Nice were annexed by Italy. That left about 40 percent of French territory, mostly in the south, as part of the Free Zone governed by the French. On July 10, the French Parliament scuttled the Republic and gave Pétain “dictatorial powers.” Pétain moved the seat of government from Paris to Vichy, the famous spa town in the center of the country, and his government would henceforth be known by that name.

The French, unfortunately, got more than they expected from Pétain. Pétain was both authoritarian and conservative, and he believed that France's defeat to Germany had been caused by too much socialism, democracy, and parliamentarism, and too little authority. He argued that liberty, equality, and fraternity had actually weakened the fiber of French

society. While he was in power, he changed France's motto to "Labor, Family, Fatherland."

For the first two years of the occupation, historians agree that most French believed that the great Pétain was playing a *double jeu* (double game) with the Germans—in other words, pretending to play into the Germans' hands while he was in fact preparing France's revenge. Pétain seems to have convinced himself that this was what he was doing.

In his *History of French Jews*, French author Pierre Bourdel recounts an anecdote where a doctor, asked to become the president of the Order of Physicians, was told he had to apply a quota on Jewish doctors. The doctor protested and Pétain replied: "If you don't do it, the Germans will. We must not let German authority substitute French authority." As it turned out, Pétain was so obsessed with "asserting French sovereignty" that there was little left for the Germans to do themselves. According to some accounts, Germany sent less than thirty thousand troops to police France during the war. France, for its part, sent hundreds of thousands of men to Germany to support the war effort as voluntary and forced labor.

Pétain's government became a mere puppet regime in November 1942, when the Germans occupied the Free Zone. The French administration remained in place and administered its own rules, like everywhere in France, but was now subject to German orders. Pétain was a mere figurehead by that time; his prime minister, Pierre Laval (1940, 1942–44) really ran the government. Laval was in favor of even closer ties with Germany. Vichy became more and more aggressive, hunting down members of the French Resistance and deporting many thousands of Jews to German concentration camps. Laval is famous for having said in the summer of 1942 that he "longed for a German victory."

To this day, the French tend to see themselves as having resisted Nazi Germany, both before the armistice and during the occupation. Yet compared to Yugoslavia—where soldiers and civilians organized overnight into a guerrilla army, grounding as many as eight German divisions and successfully ousting the Germans before the Soviets arrived—the French did little to fend off German occupation. The

French actually had little fighting spirit left after their defeat in the battle of May 1940. However, nobody will ever know the precise number of French men and women who later went on to become active members of the French underground, known as the *Résistance*. When sixty thousand French soldiers were evacuated from Narvik and Dunkirk in July 1940, only three thousand continued the struggle, mostly under General de Gaulle's Free French Forces based in London. Some specialists say there were fewer than ten thousand working for the Resistance in early 1942. The numbers swelled in 1942 when the Germans imposed the mandatory work service in Germany and occupied the French Free Zone, but decreased in 1943 as the Gestapo, the German army, and the French militia itself started cracking down on networks. By 1944, when an Allied victory became more of a certainty, the Resistance counted two hundred thousand members.

Yet the activities of resistance fighters varied greatly, as did their motivations, making it very difficult to generalize about them. Doing a research on second-language teaching, Jean-Benoît met eighty-year-old Jean-Marie Bressand, a language immersion specialist who was one of the few true heroes of the Resistance. Between 1941 and 1943, working under the war name Casino, Jean-Marie became one of the best sources of intelligence on the German military. Yet over the course of his last interview with Bressand, Jean-Benoît realized an uneasy truth. In 1937, at age seventeen, Jean-Marie had fought the Spanish Civil War as a *légionnaire* of France against the communist and the republicans. In other words, Bressand fought *with* fascists before he fought against them. By such a standard, one would have expected to find Bressand among France's collaborationists and anti-Semites during the war.

Bressand's about-face shows how futile it is to try to understand wartime France through labels, either good or bad. The seventeenth of a family of nineteen, raised in a rigorously Catholic family that attended mass twice a day, he grew up fearing evil and communism. When civil war broke out in Spain, his faith drove him to join what he thought was a crusade against the anti-Catholic revolutionaries trying to overthrow the Spanish government. But it was his faith that drove him away from fascists,

too. "It certainly wasn't Christian, the handraising salutes, the goose-stepping, the Nazi doctrine, and the weird cross," he says now.

Bressand is only too happy to poke holes in the myth that all of the French resisted the Germans. A popular belief persists to this day that on June 18, 1940, General de Gaulle rallied the country to fight the Germans over the radio. "Nobody ever entered the Resistance at de Gaulle's call, because no one ever heard him on the radio!" says Bressand, who was an officer cadet in the artillery school at the time. Not all French radios could catch messages from London, and the speech was not publicized because the French government already considered de Gaulle a traitor.

In fact, a unified "Resistance" did not even exist at the time, as Bressand's story shows only too well. After France signed the armistice with Germany, Bressand decided to "fight the Germans however he could" on his own. From his hometown of Besançon in the east he got himself a job at the local cinema, the Casino Theater. The owner, also a patriot, gave Bressand a back room he could use as a base to carry out underground activities against the Germans, but at first, anyway, Bressand wasn't too sure what to do.

Circumstances would guide him. Besançon turned out to be one of the best places possible for gathering intelligence on the German military. Located near the German and Swiss borders, and several miles from the no-man's land that divided occupied and unoccupied France, the town of fifty thousand became an important hub for battle-weary German divisions who were stationed there to rest and recuperate. The Casino Theater, next to a thermal station and a restaurant, became the German army's official entertainment center. As director of the soldier's cinema, Bressand had orders to find the best sweets he could for the Germans. To perform this service, he was given the papers he needed to move freely across the no-man's land.

After a series of chance meetings and introductions, Bressand found himself supplying German military intelligence to the British via the French army's second Clandestine Bureau in Lyon. Utterly untrained in the arts of espionage, he started out emptying garbage bins, documenting rail activity, and searching the pockets of the German officers' coats in cloakrooms. His activities quickly escalated as he gained experience, skill,

and contacts. In 1942, he eavesdropped while German admiral Wilhelm Canaris gave a secret conference on submarine warfare at the Casino. Later, with the help of a janitor, Bressand figured out how to remove decrypted military documents from the local university's incinerator before they were burned. He even managed to steal the briefcase of the Chief Inspector of the Supply Corps and Paymaster of the Reich's army, which contained a detailed report of the state of the armies stationed on the Russian front.

While Bressand was supplying intelligence to the British, other resistance cells were getting organized across France and de Gaulle worked to unify them, partly to boost his own legitimacy as the leader of the Free French. By the winter of 1943, the Resistance was organized and active enough to attract the Gestapo's attention, and they started cracking down on the movement. In the sweep of arrests that followed, most of the officers at the second Clandestine Bureau in Lyon were captured and the Germans discovered rows and rows of secret documents labeled "Casino." Having gotten word of the arrests, Bressand tried to flee to Switzerland, but was stopped. The Germans questioned him for nineteen days before figuring out that he was "Casino." Bressand was shipped to a prisoner camp in Compiègne, northeast of Paris, but escaped and fled to Switzerland. He managed to reach North Africa, via Spain, where he joined de Gaulle's Free French Force in Algeria.

Jean-Marie Bressand was not the only true resistance fighter in France, though he was certainly one of the luckiest. However, by the time of the liberation in the summer of 1944, the number of eleventh-hour resistance fighters surged. When Bressand returned to Besançon at the end of August 1944, as captain in the Free French Forces, he witnessed the grotesque spectacle of French women being shaved, whipped, and paraded naked through the streets for having slept with Germans. "Some of the women were actually informers for the Resistance. The guys who punished them were creeps, collaborationists, and black marketers trying to clear their names. I wanted to tell them that we had not been fighting for four years for this mockery of justice, but I didn't say anything. I really regret not speaking out, but I had a team to move, we had a war to fight, and I wanted to see my parents."

For most of 1944, France was ripped apart by a low-scale civil war between underground resistance fighters and the French militia, propped up by the Germans. When the war was over, de Gaulle was named France's provisional leader, and after he took power in 1945, he began carefully cultivating the myth that all of France had supported the Resistance—morally, if not in their actions. The resistance myth was a healing balm that raised French morale and consolidated de Gaulle's own power. It wasn't until after de Gaulle's death in 1970 that French historians began questioning the myth. Books and documentaries during that period revealed that many of the evil acts attributed to the occupying Germans were actually the doing of the French administration. And that's the question France is still struggling with to this day.

When he came to power, de Gaulle proclaimed that the collaborationist Vichy regime was "not France," yet from at least one perspective, Vichy definitely was France. Some of the institutions Pétain created, like France's telecommunication department and the national police, endure to this day. France's national rail service, which shipped Jews to Germany, is still operating.

Yet, France really was in a state of servitude to Germany; the country was forced to pay Germany a war tribute of four hundred million francs daily. The truth is somewhere in between these two positions. France was not united in resistance to the extent that de Gaulle wanted the populace to believe, but popular support for Pétain's government did dwindle as the war progressed and the French understood that Vichy was keener on executing communists and resisters than it was on taking revenge on Germany.

The events of World War II were so powerful that it is tempting to try to redefine the past in function of the outcome and divide France into heroes and villains. Did France collaborate or resist? Or was it a country of *attentistes* (literally, "waiters")? The debate continues, both inside and outside France. But in reality, none of these labels describe what was really going on. Most people did a bit of everything. Tragic as it was, World War I had been a great unifying experience for the French. But World War II

was forty million private wars. Forty million people in France spent four years saying one thing and doing another.

We had many friends in France who had lived through the war either as children, teenagers, or even as adults. None of them had any knowledge of what was actually going on. The radio was all government propaganda and newspapers had been whittled down to mere leaflets. Most Frenchmen never read the conditions of the armistice and they trusted Pétain, who was a war hero, after all. Food was scarce in the cities. Nobody had enough coal to heat more than a single room in any house. One and a half million men were prisoners of war in Germany and their families lived in abject poverty. By 1944, the economy had shrunk by a staggering 80 percent. It was a time of hardship.

The best illustration of the French population's mood during the war can be found in a series of short stories called *Passe-Muraille*, published in 1943 by author Marcel Aymé (1901–63), whose magic realism has inspired much of the literature of Latin America. The first story depicts the highs and lows of a Frenchman who discovers he can walk through walls (literally *passer la muraille*). It's an apt image for the overall frustration the French must have felt being prisoners in their own country. In another story, people are dealing with new restrictions that reduce their rations to fifteen days of living per month. The rest of their time is spent in limbo. The last short story, "En Attendant" (*Waiting*), is a series of fourteen monologues of people waiting in the bread line during the "War of 1939–72"—a joke that shows how nobody in France had a clue of when, or if, the war would ever end. In one of the monologues, a woman talks about the hardship of having only two pairs of shoes for her three children. Some monologues are quite long, but the shortest one, eight words in all, simply reads:

"And I, said the Jew, I'm a Jew."

There was obviously a lot more to say about being a Jew, but Aymé would not have been allowed to write about it. His brevity alone speaks volumes.

There is no doubt anymore that France persecuted Jews on its own. After Pétain came to power in July 1940, racial segregation began almost

overnight, but most of the background thinking for this had been done in anti-Jewish circles over the previous fifty years. The new government did not need much help from the Germans to strip Jews of all their rights. As early as August 1940, the Vichy government defined Jewish status, barring Jews from public offices and all state jobs, even teaching. The government went on to produce 168 anti-Jewish laws and regulations. The fact that many French collaborated with the Germans was bad enough, but the truth is that many took advantage of the situation to deprive Jews of their civil rights, their property, and their lives.

No story illustrates this better than that of Jean-Jacques Fraenkel, a sixty-eight-year-old Holocaust survivor whom Jean-Benoît met through his hiking club, and who would become a good friend of ours while we lived in France. Curiously, he was introduced to Jean-Benoît by other members of the hiking club as a “fellow Canadian.” Though he keeps a house in Paris, Jean-Jacques immigrated to Canada in 1992, bought a house in Victoria, British Columbia, and acquired Canadian citizenship. Jean-Jacques proclaimed Canadians to be the nicest people in the world. He said he admired them for being moderate and open-minded, although he himself is intense, opinionated, and extremely French. It always seemed a little ironic to us that during long meals with Jean-Jacques at our apartment in Paris our discussions revolved around a common theme: how much he hated the French. But of course, his story explains that.

Jean-Jacques's two parents were gassed in Auschwitz and his life was nearly destroyed by the war. He was eight at the onset of the war. His father, Roger, was the most famous dental surgeon in France at the time, but shortly after the Vichy government came to power, Roger lost his title as officer, then his right to teach, then his driver's license, and was told he could not leave the city. Then the Law for the Exclusion of Jews from the Economy instructed officials to confiscate Jewish businesses. Jews' bank accounts were frozen and they could not work. Eventually, any gentile who wanted the shop of a Jew could ask city hall for a paper that gave them the right to call it their own. The government began establishing quotas for Jewish students, and Jewish lawyers, and Jewish doctors. And they all had to wear the yellow star.

Roger professed his trust that the French government would protect Jews right up until his arrest on December 12, 1941. The police ordered him to pack his luggage with two days of food and underwear, but he refused, saying that he would settle the matter at the station and be back in ten minutes. He never came back—it turned out he was one of the 743 leaders of the Jewish community arrested in the first roundup of Jews in Paris. He boarded a train to Auschwitz three months later and was gassed on May 20, 1942, his wedding anniversary.

Jean-Jacques's mother Jeanine never saw her husband again. Blaming the Germans, she assumed a false identity, joined the Resistance, and moved with Jean-Jacques and his sister Josette to Nice, still a safe haven for Jews in southern France. After a year in hiding, Jeanine had her children smuggled back to Paris, where they could be hidden in safe homes and sent to Catholic schools. Several weeks after Jean-Jacques returned to Paris in November 1943, his mother was arrested and sent to the infamous deportation station of Drancy, in Paris. Five days later she was gassed at Auschwitz, on the second anniversary of her husband's arrest.

After the war, Jean-Jacques believed, like many French Jews, that the Germans alone were responsible for persecuting Jews. Unlike most French Jews, he changed his mind rather abruptly when he discovered a suitcase in his grandparents house, miraculously saved from the ruin of his family. The suitcase, containing papers and documents gathered by his mother between 1940 and 1943, showed how the French government had methodically despoiled the Fraenkels and all Jews, making them defenseless against the threat of deportation—and extermination, as it turned out. Jean-Jacques wrote his story in a book titled *Abus de Confiance (Breach of Trust)*. “My sister and I survived the war because of the Resistance, because of the dedication of those who hid us, because of Catholic schools,” he explained, “but the whole time we were being chased not only by the Germans, but by our own government.”

The French will long bear the stigma of these policies. But does their wartime behavior classify them as an anti-Semitic people? It's like asking

whether they were fundamentally resisters or collaborators with the Nazis. Nothing about wartime France is that black and white.

In all, seventy-six thousand of the three hundred thousand Jews in France died in Nazi death camps—a low estimate, which doesn't account for those who died in French camps as hostages or resistance fighters. Outside of Germany, this is the highest number of Jews from any Western European country killed. However, the proportion of French Jews saved in France is also the highest of Western Europe. Three quarters of France's Jews survived; the survival rates in Belgium and Holland were below 25 percent. Despite the anti-Semitic policies of the Vichy government and the collaboration of the French administration in persecuting Jews, it's clear a great number of people did not do what the State asked. As Jean-Jacques Fraenkel says himself, the massacre would have been much greater without the secret support of thousands of French people, the Resistance, and the lower Catholic clergy.

Yet there is no doubt that French anti-Semitism was official in character. It came in the form of directives from the State, and many civil servants applied the regulations blindly, sealing the fate of thousands of Jews. The first large-scale roundup of Jews in summer of 1942 was carried out by no fewer than six thousand French police. French Jews were treated the worst of all in French Algeria, where German soldiers never even set foot.

Clearly, it was possible for occupied countries to resist Germany's policies. In Denmark, King Christian X simply refused to accept Germany's racist laws. When it became clear that the Germans would deport Jews anyway, the Danes organized the escape of the last seven thousand Jews across the Oresund Channel to Sweden. It is tempting to attribute France's behavior to the fact that it was Catholic, but Italy—which was not only Catholic but fascist—refused to deport Jews, and only eight thousand Italian Jews died in the camps. The French government did what it was told—and more. The French Bar never protested the treatment of Jewish lawyers, like the Belgian Bar did. When French banks were asked to turn over names and account balances of Jewish clients, they froze and confiscated sixty-eight thousand Jewish accounts.

Jews in France became a general source of unearned income during the war, and the State showed citizens the way: there was a violent legal battle

between Vichy and the Germans over who would get the monopoly on the confiscation of Jewish goods. The Germans settled for 10 percent. The rest went into the French treasury or was distributed to individuals. Many French citizens just helped themselves to the spoils. People took all the Jewish possessions they could get their hands on—from furniture and sewing machines to children's books.

French anti-Semitism did, however, have one strange idiosyncrasy that distinguished it from the German attitude: the French differentiated between two types of Jews. In all their laws, French authorities always gave a preference to Jews who had been in France long enough to be integrated (two to five generations), who had fought in World War I, who had distinguished military service, or who had rendered exceptional civil services to France. Still that didn't help Roger Fraenkel, who had been given the *légion d'honneur* for his work in dentistry. According to French senator Robert Badinter, himself a Jew and the author of *Un Antisémitisme Ordinaire*, some French Jewish lawyers, just as xenophobic as the gentiles, tried to exclude themselves from early anti-Semitic laws in France. They argued that recent Jewish immigrants posed more of a threat than they did. This distinction disappeared in 1942 when the Germans ordered all Jews to wear the yellow star.

More than fifty years after the war, is it fair to accuse the French of still being fundamentally anti-Semitic? In 2001, during the second Intifada in Israel, the number of hate crimes in France doubled, from 150 to about three hundred per year. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon declared that the French were the most anti-Semitic people in the world. Dozens of articles we read in the American, British, and Canadian media echoed him, concluding that anti-Jewish sentiment was still the norm in modern France.

Basically, it depends on how you look at it. On one hand, a member of Pétain's government, François Mitterrand, went on to become the president of France from 1981 to 1995. Mitterrand was not an anti-Semite, but his *Pétainiste* past was well known in *élite* circles. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (1997–2002) was also the son of a known Protestant collaborator. Author Louis-Ferdinand Céline—so rabidly anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi

that he fled to Germany in 1944—is still admired in all classes of French society, and his works are taught in high schools. (Although, we should add that he was enough of an author to keep most of his opinions on the matter outside of his literary works.)

While there's no denying that kind of anti-Semitic thread in French culture, there are other factors that should be considered before labeling the French. Historically, France was a model of integration for the Jewish community, having granted civil rights to Jews in 1794, a good century before any other European country. France has had three Jewish presidents and two Jewish prime ministers. In his book *The French*, author Theodore Zeldin goes as far as saying that the French Jewish community is the most integrated in the world. It is also false to accuse the French of refusing to face their past. While we lived in France, not a week went by without the release of a major new report, book, or film on the behavior of the French during the war.

Terrible as the events of that war were, France as we know it today was forged by them. Most of France's modern structures were created to avoid a repetition of history.

As head of the provisional government from 1944–46, Charles de Gaulle's first job was bringing France's war criminals to justice. Nearly half a million people in France were tried for collaboration and received sentences ranging from death (3,700 executions) to loss of all civic rights (150,000). One hundred and eight members of the government were tried and sentenced along with many others among local politicians. High-ranking civil servants, officers of the army, and even bishops were punished. It was not complete—many escaped any judgment or were wrongly acquitted. But de Gaulle closed the door on the period with his famous declaration that “Vichy was not France.”

One fact is rarely mentioned in books on modern France: for better or for worse, France was the only German-occupied country that was allowed to clear up the mess of the war on its own, much the way it had been the only German-occupied country allowed to run things itself. In 1944, while the Americans were still fighting with the French against the occupying

Germans, Charles de Gaulle rejected the AMGOT (Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories). This scheme for post-war reconstruction would have given Americans control over French currency, transport, the appointment of civil servants, and the war tribunals. The AMGOT was imposed on Belgium, Holland, and Germany, but de Gaulle rejected it, fearing that the Americans would use their presence in France to impose their values and customs and turn France into a client state. Whatever the reason, during the liberation process, General Charles de Gaulle, head of the Free French Forces and of the Resistance, quickly established his legitimacy as the head of France's provisional government and got down to business.

De Gaulle set out after the war to renew France socially, politically, and economically. He said he wanted to restore France's honor, independence, and rank among great nations. With that in mind, he and the new generation of leaders he brought with him began by raising the principle of assimilation to the level of a unifying ideal of the French Republic. French citizens would no longer be said to have a religion, a skin color, or even an ethnic origin. Everyone with French citizenship would be French, period; they would be assimilated in the melting pot of the Republic. The government would keep no record or files on French citizens' religion and ethnicity and would not ask for this information in the national census. France reinstated the policy that all children born in France were French, no matter what their ethnic origin. The French State did make serious mistakes in applying the principle of assimilation, namely in Algeria. And the assimilation ideal certainly hasn't eliminated racism, yet it remains one of the strongest, most widely shared values of modern France.

De Gaulle made significant changes in France's social programs and nationalized many industries, but France had to go through another severe political crisis, the War of Algeria, before its institutions would be changed for good, and for the better.