



# WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on  
Resistance in Europe during  
World War II

Edited by

Elma Hašimbegović, Nicolas Moll and Ivo Pejaković

# Comparing Resistance in Yugoslavia with France and Germany

*A Conversation with Robert Gildea and Christl Wickert*

## **The general context**

*Let us first compare the general situation. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was attacked, occupied and dismembered in April 1941. Some parts were annexed by Germany and its allies, Serbia came under German military administration, while large parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina became the so-called Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska – NDH). The NDH was a vassal state of Germany and Italy, headed by Ante Pavelić, who had led a small terrorist organisation, the Ustasha, in the 1930s and whose forces very quickly began a massive campaign of terror against parts of the population. Germany militarily occupied one half of the territory and Italy the other until Italy's capitulation in 1943, whereupon German troops occupied the entire territory.*

Robert Gildea:

France was attacked one year before Yugoslavia, in May 1940 and also suffered a crushing defeat within a few weeks and then signed an armistice dictated by Germany in June. Similar to Yugoslavia, the French territory was also treated in different ways: In the east of France, Alsace and parts of Lorraine were annexed, and the northern half of France and the Atlantic coast down to the Spanish border was occupied by the German military. This was initially not the case for the southern half, the so-called Free Zone, until November 1942 when German troops also occupied this part, in response to the Allied landings in North Africa. Incidentally, there was also an Italian occupation zone in southeastern France, which Germany took over after the Italian capitulation in autumn 1943.

Similar to the NDH, a new regime was also established in France, in summer 1940: the so-called *État français*, which abolished the Republic,

with its seat in Vichy in central France. Vichy France was, like the NDH, a vassal state of Germany, which increasingly engaged in open collaboration, but there were also two important differences. Firstly, unlike Ante Pavelić in the NDH, Philippe Pétain as head of the new state was incredibly popular. As victor of Verdun he was a legend of World War I, and many French people thought initially that he would defend their interests against Germany. And secondly, although there were increasingly influential fascist groups in the Vichy regime, for example the *Milice*, which was founded in 1943 to crush the resistance, Vichy was more of a national-conservative, authoritarian state. The regime also did not immediately use open terror against parts of its own population and built up its antisemitic measures gradually.

Christl Wickert:

The context in Germany was very different compared to Yugoslavia and France. Germany was not a country attacked and occupied by a foreign state, but it was the country in which the Nazi Party had taken power in 1933 and then invaded and occupied large parts of Europe during World War II. The occupation policy was carried out everywhere by force, generally with even more violence in Eastern Europe than in the West. In the invaded and occupied countries, Nazi Germany often set up collaborator regimes, such as the Independent State of Croatia or the Vichy regime, in order to preserve its own forces.

As far as the situation within Germany was concerned, Hitler was legally appointed Reich Chancellor on 31 January 1933, and many thought that he would not remain in power for long. However, the Nazi leaders used the Reichstag fire in February 1933 to drastically restrict civil rights and arrest political opponents en masse, and in this climate of terror, the majority of parliament voted on 23 March to give full powers to the government in what was known as the *Ermächtigungsgesetz*, or enabling law. All communist members of the parliament had already been arrested at that time; only the social-democrat MPs who were present voted against the law.

Germany was transformed into a dictatorship that increasingly encompassed all levels of society and everyday life. Through propaganda and terror, economic policy measures, foreign policy successes and the first victories in the war, the Nazi regime also secured the support of the German population. The development of totalitarian power structures and the population's



Map 1: Axis occupation and partition of Yugoslavia in World War II (as of 1941). The grey line within the Independent State of Croatia represents the demarcation line between the German occupation zone (on the northern side) and the Italian zone. (Source: wikimedia commons, public domain)

attitude, which ranged between conformism, consent and active participation, also minimised the scope for resistance within the society.

## The beginnings of resistance

*Let us now turn to the beginnings of resistance. In the NDH and also in other parts of Yugoslavia, armed uprisings broke out within a few months of the occupation and spread rapidly. Very soon, a powerful and well-organised resistance force emerged with the communist-led Partisan movement. This development was accompanied by a brutal civil war, among others, with the royalist Serbian nationalist Chetnik movement, which had also started as a resistance force but then turned increasingly towards collaboration. What can we say about the beginnings and developments of resistance in France and Germany?*



Map 2: Occupation zones in France during World War II.  
(Source: wikimedia commons © Eric Gabe, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Robert Gildea:

There was also early resistance in France, but it was isolated and sporadic, and not armed. The shock of defeat was profound and, as in many other occupied countries, the vast majority of people came to terms with the occupation and the new regime. Only very few took immediate action: these included the then still unknown general Charles de Gaulle, who went to London and urged the French to continue the fight from there, as he announced in a radio address on 18 June 1940, which almost nobody heard at the time. Others said to themselves that they should do something and didn't really know what to begin with. First groups and networks developed, for example what was later called the *Musée de l'Homme* network, which included persons working at the mentioned ethnographic museum in Paris; they helped escaped prisoners of war and Allied soldiers, wrote and distributed leaflets and an underground newspaper, and gathered intelligence for

the British. With time, more structured and organised groups emerged, and they increasingly worked together: a crucial step was the formation of the National Council of Resistance (*Conseil national de la Résistance* – CNR) in May 1943, which included nearly all the internal resistance movements, including the communists, and also trade unions and political parties, and which acknowledged the leadership of de Gaulle. The Resistance in France remained very plural and marked by many internal rivalries, but nevertheless they came together in a united front.

The German occupiers and the Vichy regime took increasingly violent action against the Resistance, and this confrontation between Vichy forces and the Resistance had civil war-like characteristics. However, there was no equivalent in France to the Chetniks, who initially resisted and then slipped into collaboration and fought a violent war with the Partisans.

Christl Wickert:

In Germany, there were active opponents of the National Socialist Party (NSDAP) before 1933, especially among the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland* – SPD) and the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* – KPD), even though the KPD had sometimes organised strikes together with the NSDAP against the Weimar Republic at the end of the 1920s. However, most were not prepared for resistance in illegality, especially not in the SPD. One exception was the International Socialist Militant League (*Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund* – ISK), in which women and men from the SPD and KPD were already preparing for illegality in 1932.

When the NSDAP took power in January 1933, many opponents of the Nazis faced a bitter choice: arrest or exile. Politicians from the left who came from Jewish families without necessarily identifying themselves as Jewish were particularly at risk. After casting her vote in the last parliamentary elections on 5 March 1933, Reichstag deputy Tony Sender, for example, fled to Czechoslovakia following death threats. Those who consciously stayed often paid for this with their lives. The SPD leader in the Prussian state parliament, Ernst Heilmann, for example, wanted to continue fighting the NSDAP legally from Berlin. But a few days after the SPD was banned in June 1933, he was arrested and then spent several years in concentration camps until his murder in Buchenwald in 1940.

Despite ever-increasing persecution, underground resistance groups and activities developed in Germany in the early years, particularly from

the communist side, which produced and distributed numerous leaflets and anti-Nazi writings. Resistance groups were mainly formed in cities, and there were also networks like the White Rose (*Weiße Rose*) student organisation, which was founded in Munich in 1942 and had contacts with groups in Berlin and Hamburg. But throughout the 12 years of the Nazi era, resistance in Germany remained extremely isolated and fragmented, unlike in Yugoslavia and France. Martin Niemöller, a pastor of the Nazi-critical Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) and a prisoner in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps from 1937 to 1945, wrote the following text there, presumably in 1938: “First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.” These lines not only contain self-criticism, but also show the lack of cooperation between the various opponents of the regime.

### **Main motivations for resistance**

*As Hrvoje Klasić's text emphasises, the triggers for the first uprisings in the NDH were the existential threat posed by the terror of the Ustasha, while for other persons it was patriotic and anti-fascist reasons. These motivations could also overlap. How was the situation in France and Germany: who resisted and for which reasons?*

Robert Gildea:

The resisters in France emerged from a wide range of different milieux, with very different views and aims, and were drawn from all parts of the political spectrum, from the extreme left to the extreme right, including socialists and Christian democrats. Many acted out of patriotism: they did not want to resign themselves to defeat and occupation by Germany. This applies, for example, to Charles de Gaulle, who came from a traditional-conservative milieu. For others, resistance was a continuation of the antifascist movement that had led to the Popular Front in France in 1936. Many of those who became active in the resistance were those who were particularly targeted by the German occupation and the Vichy regime:

foreigners, Jews and communists. This does not necessarily mean that they were only or mainly active in the Resistance because they saw themselves as personally endangered. Many of the French Jews who joined the resistance did so not because they felt Jewish but as French patriots. For many, however, antifascist and patriotic motivations overlapped with the experience of personal danger.

Interestingly, especially in the beginning, opposition to Germany was not necessarily linked to opposition to Vichy. However, the increasingly open collaboration of the Vichy regime with the German occupiers also drove many who had initially still trusted Petain into a more active resistance, not only against the German occupation but also against the collaborating Vichy regime. With the increasing antisemitic persecution, helping Jews became more urgent – and those who helped did not necessarily do so because they were antifascists, patriots or persecuted themselves, but for humanist reasons. The step into resistance could derive from family backgrounds or be an effect of contingency: In early 1941, for example, 17-year-old Madeleine Riffaud was walking in the train station of Amiens when she was stopped by German soldiers and one kicked her in the backside. She later wrote: “I was so furious, it was humiliation, anger and in my anger I vowed to myself that I would find the Resistance. [...] It all started from there.”

Christl Wickert:

I would distinguish between three main forms and motivations for resistance in Germany: political resistance, ideological dissent and everyday dissent. Political resistance, which grew out of a traditionally bound identity, was directed against the Nazi system as such and could be found above all in the labour movement. Ideological dissent could be found mainly among representatives of religious groups – Catholics, members of the “Confessing Church” and Jehovah’s Witnesses. These groups resisted above all the attacks on their respective religious communities and their way of life, but not against the National Socialist state as such. And finally, everyday dissent, which could be seen in telling political jokes, listening to foreign radio stations or refusing to make the Hitler salute – which could be life-threatening due to the Nazi regime’s claim to total obedience.

Of course, there were also overlaps and fluid transitions, from nonconformism to refusal to active resistance. And there were also other forms of



non-conformist behaviour that do not fall into the aforementioned categories. These include helping those persecuted by the regime, in particular hiding Jews, which is now referred to in Germany as *Rettungswiderstand* – rescue resistance. This could be connected to the aforementioned motivations and forms of resistance, but it did not have to be. It is also important to note that, as in other countries, Jews themselves actively contributed to their own rescue. It is estimated that around 1.700 Jews survived the war underground in Berlin – they did not do this because they were passively waiting for help, but because they themselves were looking for ways to survive.

To what extent did those Germans who became active in the resistance also act for patriotic reasons? Yes, many of those who fought against the Nazis wanted a “different Germany”, saying that the Nazi state was not the real Germany. But as a resistance fighter in Germany, it was more difficult to be a “patriot” than in an occupied country because in Germany, resistance fighters were immediately labelled traitors to the fatherland (*Vaterlandsverräter*) by the regime, especially during the war. They were also perceived as such by the vast majority of the population.

## **The Communist Party’s role**

*In the NDH and in the rest of Yugoslavia, the Communist Party managed to become the leading resistance force and, in doing so, also brought along many people who were not communists, in a policy of the National Front that was supported by Moscow. How can the role of communist resistance in France and Germany be summarised?*

Robert Gildea:

The German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 played a decisive role in the resistance of French communists, as it did for the Communist Party in Yugoslavia. Prior to this, the Hitler-Stalin Pact had had a paralysing effect. In Yugoslavia, this hesitant attitude lasted only a short time, as there were only two months between the invasion of Yugoslavia and that of the Soviet Union. But in France, a whole year passed between the armistice of June 1940 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, which is one of the reasons why the resistance in France began so cautiously.

Although there were Communists in the resistance during this period and there were some actions, for example, a strike among the miners in the north of France in May 1941, the French Communist Party (*Parti Communiste Français* – PCF) as a whole behaved very cautiously, and when it did engage in propaganda, it was more against Vichy than against Germany.

This changed radically after the German attack on the Soviet Union. From this point, the communist resistance developed into one of the most active forces in France, with the movement *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans* as its military arm. Similar to Yugoslavia, the PCF in France pursued a policy of the National Front, and the *Front National* was also the name of the political arm of the communist resistance – it was a way of encouraging people to get involved in communist-sponsored resistance without necessarily knowing that it was led by communists. So, for example, the National Front in France included a large number of Catholic resisters who wouldn't otherwise have joined the resistance. Continuing Popular Front policy, the PCF then also joined in 1943 the National Council of Resistance (*Conseil National de la Résistance*) as the united French resistance front. But while the Communist Party was clearly the dominant force in the Partisan movement in Yugoslavia, even if it included representatives of other political tendencies, the united resistance movement in France was much more diverse politically and the PCF played an important but not the dominant role in it.

Christl Wickert:

As mentioned, communists in Germany were among the early opponents of the Nazis, and when Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor on 30 January 1933, the KPD called for a general strike, which was hardly heeded. They were also those who were most persecuted by the Nazi regime from the outset, for example with the arrest of their Reichstag deputies as early as February 1933, even before the KPD was banned. In contrast to Yugoslavia, where the party leadership continued to operate within its own territory, the leadership of the KPD was largely active abroad. It tried to stay in contact with the underground groups in Germany via bases along the borders of the Reich, but this became increasingly difficult. Many groups were largely on their own. One of them was the Herbert Baum Group, a communist and Jewish resistance group formed in 1936, which distributed leaflets and underground newspapers in Berlin and carried out an arson attack on the anti-Soviet propaganda exhibition “The Soviet Paradise”

on 18 May 1942. Some communists were also able to organise themselves in concentration camps: The best-known example is Buchenwald, where members of the KPD dominated the camp's resistance organisation.

As there was no united German resistance, the question of the KPD's influence on such a movement did not arise. One important initiative was the National Committee for a Free Germany (*Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* – NKFD), which was formed in the Soviet Union in 1943. Based on the idea of the Popular Front, it brought together German prisoners of war, most of whom were not communists, and German communist émigrés. The NKFD's main task was persuading Wehrmacht soldiers at the front to defect. As far as the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 was concerned, it was like in many other European countries; it confused and disturbed many communists in Germany, but the KPD leadership in exile stood firmly by Moscow's decision.

## **Resistance inside and outside the occupied territory**

*This brings us to the question of the role that areas and actors outside of their own territory played in resistance. In the case of the NDH and for Yugoslavia as a whole, it is striking how much the Partisan resistance organised itself from within. There was a royalist government in exile in London, but it supported the Chetnik movement in occupied Yugoslavia. Also, the British government initially supported the Chetniks and not the Partisans, before changing its position in 1943. But despite increasing international support from 1943, the actors of the Partisan resistance stayed and fought on occupied Yugoslav territory.*

Robert Gildea:

It was different for France. Parallel to the various internal resistance movements, there was also outside the metropolitan territory the so-called Free France (*France Libre*), led by de Gaulle, and the two most important areas for this were London and Africa. From London, he built up the *France Libre*, politically and militarily, before making Algiers its centre following the liberation of North Africa by the Allies. After the armistice agreement of June 1940, Algeria and other French territories and colonies in Africa had been placed under the control of the Vichy regime, including the

French Army of Africa that existed there. In order to strengthen de Gaulle's position, it was crucial for him to gain control over these territories and their resources, which he ultimately succeeded in doing, despite ongoing tensions with Vichy and the Allies. From London, and then from Algiers after 1943, de Gaulle also tried to increase his influence on the resistance movements in France, which was very limited at the beginning. He eventually succeeded here also, even if the relationship between the external and the internal resistance always remained tense.

For the development of the French internal and external resistance, the support of the Allies was very important. As it did in Yugoslavia, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the secret British organisation formed in 1940, dropped agents and weapons on the French territory to support the local resistance. With one interesting difference: While Churchill didn't hesitate to support the communist-led Partisan movement in Yugoslavia from 1943, he was reluctant to support the communist resistance in France, so that well into 1944 supplies of weapons from the air were restricted to non-communist groups.

Christl Wickert:

In Germany, after 1933, resistance to the Nazis was strongly articulated outside of the country, in exile. The aforementioned Tony Sender, for example, immediately became involved in anti-Nazi border work towards Saxony after fleeing to Czechoslovakia in 1933, then in an exile political organisation in Amsterdam, and finally in the U.S. from 1935. In the U.S., she gave lectures on the situation in the Third Reich and during the war, wrote reports on countries occupied by the Wehrmacht for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the American secret service.

Two important places of exile in the 1930s were Czechoslovakia and France, where antifascist emigrants attempted to raise awareness of the Nazi regime and help resistance groups in Germany. When these countries were occupied by Germany, some attempted to flee, while others stayed and joined the local resistance. This was particularly the case in France. One example is the German-Jewish communist Dora Schaul, who fled Germany in 1933 and moved first to Holland and then to France; she escaped from a French internment camp in 1942 and was hired under a false identity by a Wehrmacht office in Lyon, where she gathered valuable information for the Resistance.

There were also contacts between German resisters in exile and within Germany during the war, but they were very difficult. The communist Käthe Niederkirchner, for example, who had been living in exile in the Soviet Union since 1933, parachuted over Poland in October 1943 to join the inner-German resistance, but was then arrested on the journey to Berlin and murdered in Ravensbrück concentration camp. In contrast to France, there was never a synthesis between resistance from within and resistance from outside. And unlike France and Yugoslavia, the resistance within Germany did not receive any support from the Allies. There were attempts by resistance groups in Germany to make contact with the Allies, but the British government in particular reacted negatively as it did not trust the German resistance forces.

### **Key moments for the development of resistance**

*Resistance did not develop in a linear way in any country in Europe. In general, it can be said that it increased in the occupied countries over time, but there were also setbacks and, in turn, important developmental steps. In Yugoslavia, 1942 was a particularly difficult year, as the German occupiers organised several offensives against the Partisans; 1943 was then a decisive year, especially with the capitulation of Italy, which gave the Partisan movement a very strong boost. What were key moments for the resistance in France and Germany?*

Robert Gildea:

External circumstances also played an important role for the French Resistance, for example the Allied landing in North Africa in November 1942, which strengthened the development of the *France libre*. Within France, a decisive moment was the introduction of forced labour service, the *Service du travail obligatoire* (STO), in February 1943. This was when the Vichy regime agreed forcibly to send young men of military age to Germany to work in the factories for the German war effort. Until then, the majority of French people had not faced a direct existential threat – but being forced to go to Germany meant leaving a familiar environment to work directly for the enemy and to be exposed to incalculable risks, for example the Allied bombing of German factories. This decision affected hundreds

of thousands of young men and their families, and a good part refused to leave and went instead into hiding. Of these so-called *réfractaires*, several tens of thousands went into the *maquis*, which was a kind of the equivalent of what was seen in Yugoslavia, moving to the mountains and to the forests where camps of resistance were established. So the STO brought new persons to the resistance and also created new spaces of resistance, in which the countryside became more important.

A crucial moment for the development of the resistance was then the landing in Normandy in June 1944. A lot of the *maquis* broke cover after D-Day, and started attacking Germans who they thought were retreating. It was at that moment that German collective reprisals became the most intense. So the most dangerous moment for the resistance in France during the entire war was that time span between D-Day and the liberation of Paris in August 1944.

The progressive liberation of France in summer 1944 and the attraction of being on the winning side motivated others who had stayed passive so far or who had been part of the collaborating forces to join the resistance. Here, obviously, opportunistic motivations were a decisive factor. The phenomenon of last-minute resisters existed in all occupied countries – in France there is one specific term to design them: *résistants de la 25ème heure*, resisters of the 25th hour.

Christl Wickert:

For Germany, it is important to distinguish between the pre-war period and the war period. On the one hand, the war made resistance even more difficult; on the other hand, the war also encouraged people to become more active. One example is the Red Orchestra (*Rote Kapelle*) network, which brought together women and men of various political and religious orientations and whose most intensive period was in the years 1940-1942. The Red Orchestra distributed leaflets and texts, documented Nazi crimes of violence against the civilian population of the occupied territories, particularly in the Soviet Union, and organised a poster campaign in protest against the propaganda exhibition titled “The Soviet Paradise”. For some who turned to the resistance during the war, experiences from the front played a significant role, because it was there that they learnt of the mass crimes committed by the Nazis. A central question is how much the changing war situation, especially after the lost battle of Stalingrad in February

1943, affected motivations for resistance. This concerns, for example, the conspiracy of 20 July 1944, which aimed to kill Hitler and end Nazi rule. In the circles of 20 July, similar plans existed partially already before 1942, but that military defeat that was foreseeable in 1944 was certainly an important motivation to take action at that time, also in order to possibly avoid Germany's unconditional surrender.

The beginning of the war in 1939 also meant a turning point for women. On the one hand, they had new opportunities on the labour market, but on the other, additional everyday problems due to supply shortages and then the bombing of the cities. Gestapo files from the end of 1938 already mention that a growing number of women were making "defeatist statements" against the impending war. The war then reinforced women's attitudes of refusal, for example against the compulsory labour in the armaments industry introduced in 1940 as a replacement for front-line soldiers. The Nazi state punished this everyday dissent as "undermining the military force" (*Wehrkraftzersetzung*).

## **Resistance as multi- and transnational phenomenon**

*What is also characteristic of the Partisan movement in Yugoslavia is that it succeeded in appealing to different national groups, for example within Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbs, Croats and Muslims, as well as to minorities. France and Germany did not define themselves as multinational societies, but here too the question arises: how "national" or how multinational/transnational was the resistance?*

Robert Gildea:

This is a crucial question. The role of foreigners in the Resistance in France has for a long time been ignored. Many of those who became involved in resistance activity in France had come there in the interwar period as economic migrants seeking work, as political exiles fleeing repressive regimes, or as a combination of both. There were for example Poles, Italians, Spaniards and Germans, and many of them were of Jewish origins. A main gathering place for them was the French Communist Party's organisation MOI (*Main d'Oeuvre Immigrée* / Immigrant Labour), which under the German occupation formed its own armed underground group, under

the umbrella of the mainly French *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans*: FTP-MOI. The FTP-MOI carried out numerous anti-German guerilla actions in Paris and other towns between 1941 and 1944.

The transnational dimension of resistance during World War II in France and Europe is also evident in that many members of the International Brigades, who fought in the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1939, later joined the resistance in their country of origin or in other countries. There they brought with them the military experience they had gained in Spain. This was the case in Yugoslavia, and also in France: The Polish-Jewish Mendel Langer and the Yugoslav Ljubomir Ilić, for example, had commanding roles in the International Brigades and then also in France in the southern zone in the FTP and the FTP-MOI. Thousands of Spanish Republicans who had fled Spain in 1939 also joined the Resistance in France.

Let us also not forget the role of people from the French colonies. Within metropolitan France, the resistance also included former soldiers from Africa who had deserted or escaped from prison camps. Additionally, the majority of the rank and file who fought with the Free French Forces in Africa were soldiers from the French colonies. But after the Liberation, neither de Gaulle nor the French Communist Party were eager to highlight the role of non-French citizens in the liberation of France. This changed only slowly. An important step to recognize their contribution has been the recent introduction in the French Pantheon of the Armenian immigrant Missak Manouchian who had headed the FTP-MOI in Paris in 1942-1943, and of his wife Mélinée.

Christl Wickert:

Regarding transnational resistance, we must on the one hand talk about the Germans who were active in the resistance in other countries, including France, as mentioned by Robert Gildea. One example of the integration of German emigrants into the Resistance was German Work (*Travail Allemand*), a grouping in the *Front National* initiated by the French Communists. Its main task was to carry out propaganda work among members of the German occupying forces and later also to procure intelligence and weapons from the Wehrmacht service centres.

On the other hand, there was also resistance from non-Germans within Germany. Among the forced labourers brought to Germany from all over



Europe, there were for example organised revolts, sabotage, individual rebellion, escape and contacts with German resistance groups. Concentration camps were also important places of transnational resistance in Germany. Ravensbrück is a good example: many of the women interned there, from the Soviet Union, France, Poland, Yugoslavia and other countries, had been resistants in their own countries and had been deported precisely because of this. They developed various forms of solidarity in the camp to help each other and defy the concentration camp violence. The role of foreigners living in Germany should also be mentioned, especially in the rescue resistance. One example is the Brazilian Aracy de Carvalho, who worked at the Brazilian consulate in Hamburg and, against the instructions of her superiors, organised visas and passports for persecuted Jews.

### **Women in resistance**

*The Partisan movement in Yugoslavia is also characterised by the massive participation of women, in various roles, and tens of thousands of them also as fighters. At the same time, there were also patriarchal prejudices in their own ranks against their participation.*

Robert Gildea:

The role of women in the French resistance has also long been underestimated. After the defeat of 1940, when men of military age had either been dispersed or were in prisoner of war camps, women were among the first to form resistance groups. As in other countries, in France the war created a situation where women continued to be confronted with traditional gender stereotypes, and at the same time unexpected opportunities came up to step out of the usual social conventions. When Marguerite Gonnet, head of *Libération-Sud* in the Isère, was arrested and questioned in 1942 by a German military court as to why she had taken up arms, she replied, “Quite simply, colonel, because the men had dropped them”. Women were active in many segments of resistance, for example in intelligence work, propaganda, as SOE agents and in sabotage. Their most important role was as liaison agents or couriers, a crucial task because resistance networks were widely and thinly drawn, and because telephones and letters were closely monitored, and because women were less likely to be stopped than men

at street controls set up by German or Vichy forces. Also, outside formal resistance groups, women played a significant role, for example by helping and sheltering persecuted persons, including Jews.

In contrast to the Partisan movement in Yugoslavia, women in France rarely bore arms. An exception was Madeleine Riffaud, who as an FTP fighter shot dead a German officer in Paris on 23 July 1944. This is one of the reasons for the relatively low profile of female resisters after the war, as the public image and recognition of resistance in France was connected with military activity and armed fighters.

Christl Wickert:

In Germany as well, the role of women in the resistance was not recognised for a long time. Since the early 1990s, however, more research has been carried out on this topic and their role is also being recognised more in the public: This can be seen, for example, in the fact that the German Resistance Memorial Centre in Berlin will open an exhibition this year on the subject of “Women in the Resistance against National Socialism”.

Women had to contend with stereotypical images of their role in Germany too. Generally, women were underrepresented in leadership positions in the organised resistance, and there were only a few resistance groups in which women could be described as equal partners. This is particularly true of the aforementioned Red Orchestra, the Herbert Baum Group and the *Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund*. In many other groups, women played a more discreet but not negligible role in the physical and psychological support of men active in the underground.

As part of the rescue resistance, a spectacular action initiated by women took place in Berlin in February 1943. It was a vociferous demonstration by “Aryan” wives (some with their children) in favour of the release of their husbands and fathers. They had been arrested at their workplaces as Jewish forced labourers in the arms industry and were to be transported to an extermination camp. This unique action of massive resistance against the deportation of family members in front of the Gestapo prison on Rosenstraße in Berlin-Mitte lasted several days. It made a great impression on the National Socialists and saved the lives of the family members.

## Armed resistance

*Another characteristic of the Partisan movement across Yugoslavia is its armed dimension and its military strength. The Partisans quickly built up armed forces, which led a constant campaign of sabotage, ambushes, raids, attacks and battles. They were able to liberate and control bigger territories within Yugoslavia. And what began as guerrilla squads was increasingly transformed into a regular and massive army.*

Robert Gildea:

The development and organisation of the French armed resistance was rather different. Within France, armed resistance only really developed one year after the occupation began, from summer 1941. It was mainly an urban guerrilla action, especially by the communists, with their armed wing, the *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans*, carrying out direct attacks on German institutions and personnel. But de Gaulle was opposed to it, since these attacks triggered harsh reprisals by the Germans and he thought that it was necessary to wait for the Allies to land. The internal resistance movements close to de Gaulle also had their paramilitary wings, which gathered in 1943 under the name *Armée secrète* and were more an armed force in construction and in waiting. Various military formations, which often lacked weapons and training, developed in the *maquis*. Most of the armed actions then took place in 1944, in connection with the Normandy landings and the progressive liberation of the territory, with numerous acts of sabotage and attacks on the forces and installations of the German army and the Vichy regime.

Outside metropolitan France, de Gaulle built up the military units of the *France Libre*, who from 1941 were involved in combat activities in Africa, against Italians and Germans, alongside with Allied troops, and partially also against the Vichy-controlled French Army of Africa. The latter then switched to the side of the Allies, and in August 1943 merged with the units of the *France Libre*, to become the *Armée française de la Libération*, the French Army of Liberation. From 3.000 persons in July 1940 and approximately 50.000 in summer 1943, the *France Libre* now controlled an army of over 400.000 soldiers. Parts of this army then participated in the Allied invasion of Italy in September 1943, of Normandy in June 1944 and in Provence in August 1944. In the summer 1944 the external and internal

military forces of the Resistance then worked together for the liberation of metropolitan France, even if their relation was sometimes tense.

Christl Wickert:

We cannot speak of armed or military resistance within Germany in the strict sense. Rather, one should speak of resistance in the military. There were some small opposition circles in the Wehrmacht. The best-known examples are the various officers who belonged to the 20 July 1944 conspiracy, including Claus von Stauffenberg, who carried out the failed bomb attack on Hitler that day. This was not the only attempt to assassinate Hitler; there were also corresponding plans in military circles in previous years, but also beyond. On 8 November 1939, Hitler was almost killed by a bomb in Munich; this assassination attempt was planned and carried out solely by the carpenter and Nazi opponent Georg Elser. There were also very few “rescuers in uniform”, members of the Wehrmacht who tried to save Jews in the occupied countries. These included Sergeant Anton Schmid, who rescued hundreds of Jews from the ghetto in Vilnius in 1942 and also supported members of the Jewish resistance movement there.

## **Post-war visions**

*Beyond rejecting fascism and/or occupation, one motivation for participating in the resistance was also the vision of a new order. For the KPJ, it was the vision of a socialist society and of an united Yugoslavia in which the different nations would live together on an equal basis. Under no circumstances the KPJ wanted a return to the previous system, the monarchy and a centralised Yugoslavia. What were dominant post-war plans in the resistance in France and Germany?*

Robert Gildea:

In terms of post-war visions of the French resistance, the most important document is the charter of the *Conseil national de Résistance*, which was adopted on 15 March 1944 by all the strands of resistance, from the right to the communists. This charter included a governmental program for the future, among them nationalisations, the establishment of social security and votes for women. In many ways it was a kind of a blueprint

for what happened at the liberation in France. More generally, this charter expressed a consensus that after the German occupation and the Vichy regime, France should continue to be, or become again, a Republic, but not the same stale Republic that had lost the war. The CNR therefore did not advocate a complete break with the pre-war system, but more a renewal of French state and society.

At the same time, there were huge struggles between the communist and non-communist resistance for who would become the more influential force in liberated France. For some time, there was the fear that there would be a communist *coup d'Etat* in France at the liberation. But in fact nothing such happened, partly because Stalin held off, partly also because the communists became part of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, which was established in June 1944 and in which they held several ministerial positions. So why would they have a revolution when they were already in power? They remained a dominant force in French politics until the outbreak of the Cold War in 1947.

Christl Wickert:

As the German resistance was so fragmented, there was also no common vision of what Germany should look like after the war. For many, a return to the previous political system was not really an option. Germany had only experienced a brief period of democracy, with the Weimar Republic, which many considered a catastrophic failure. In the very diverse circles around 20 July 1944, there was a common understanding that the rule of law should be restored, but there was no agreement on the future form of government. Many of them rejected parliamentary democracy and favoured a strong German state with a dominant executive. There were also other voices. Interestingly, the KPD did not call for a socialist system in 1945, but for social reforms and a democratic renewal with a parliamentary republic, although it is debatable to what extent this was merely tactical. For some groups, the European reference was important: in one of its leaflets, the White Rose demanded a federalist Germany in a united Europe and that Germany must separate itself from imperialism and Prussian militarism for all time.

## **The contribution of resistance to the defeat of Nazi Germany**

*It is also characteristic of Yugoslavia that the Partisan movement largely liberated the country itself. In the liberation of parts of Serbia in 1944, the Red Army fought together with the Partisan army, but in the NDH and other parts, it was the Partisan army that ended the occupation. What can be said about the contribution of the resistance in France and in Germany to the defeat of Nazi Germany?*

Robert Gildea:

On 25 August 1944, in liberated Paris, de Gaulle said these famous words: "Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and help of the whole of France." He failed to mention the Allied troops. It is true that there had been an insurrection by the resistance within Paris when the Allied troops approached and that the first army division which entered Paris was a French one, accompanied by an American one. But for the Americans the priority was to pursue the German army as it retreated eastwards and not to liberate Paris. Only after de Gaulle insisted that they liberate Paris as a priority and to lead the attack, did they allow him to do so. Of course the liberation of Paris and of the rest of the French territory would not have been possible without the Allied landing in Normandy and the massive deployment of American and British troops on the French territory. To put it shortly: France was not liberated by the French with the support of the Allies, but by the Allied with support of the French.

That said, the resistance played a significant role in the liberation of the territory, through its external and internal forces, and in some places more than others. It is little known that the liberation of southwest France was largely achieved from within, in the slipstream of the landing of the Allied troops including the French army, but without their direct involvement: the towns of Toulouse, Perigueux, Agen, Foix, Castres, Alès and Nimes were all liberated in August 1944 by diverse regional resistance forces, among which the part of immigrants was particularly high.

All together, the fact that there had been a resistance against Nazi Germany and Vichy allowed their forces to constitute a government in 1944 in liberated France and to reestablish the Republic, and also for France to become one of the occupying powers in Germany in 1945.

Christl Wickert:

If you think in terms of effectiveness, you can say that the German resistance achieved nothing. There were only a few of them, they could not overthrow the regime and could not prevent nor end the war. But what was decisive was that there was resistance: it showed that not all Germans blindly followed the Nazi state, and these women and men, many of whom paid for their efforts with their lives, thus contributed to the moral rehabilitation of Germany after the war.

### **Narratives about resistance since 1945**

*Let us finally look at the dominant narratives about the resistance that developed after the war. In Socialist Yugoslavia, the narrative about the Partisan struggle was omnipresent and served to legitimise the central role of the Communist Party. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the situation changed radically, and today in most successor states, the dominant narratives about World War II ignore the Partisans, denigrate them or attempt to reinterpret them in nationalist terms.*

Robert Gildea:

In France, the Gaullist narrative of resistance dominated in the first decades after liberation, focusing on the General's leading role, on military resistance, especially of the *France Libre*, and emphasising that the French had liberated themselves. However, the Gaullist narrative never exercised complete hegemony in France, and the communists insisted on their own leading role in the resistance. There have been important developments since the 1970s: On the one hand, the question of collaboration became much more present, and on the other, dimensions that had long been neglected received more attention: civilian forms of resistance, the role of women and also of foreigners: Polish Jews, Spanish republicans, Italian antifascists and even German anti-Nazis. With the increasing significance of the Holocaust, the rescue of Jews also became an important topic, whereby resistance is viewed from a humanitarian rather than a political perspective. There have therefore been significant developments in the narratives about the resistance in France in recent decades, but not radical change as in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Christl Wickert:

It is characteristic of Germany that until 1989 the discourse on the resistance was very divided between the GDR and the Federal Republic. In East Germany, the focus was on the communist resistance, which, as in Yugoslavia, played a central role in legitimising the regime. In West Germany, from the 1950s onwards, the focus was on the military resistance of the men of 20 July 1944, the White Rose, and in some cases also ecclesiastical resistance. It was not until the 1980s that citizens' initiatives emerged in the Federal Republic of Germany, which focused more on everyday resistance and the role of the labour movement and women in the resistance. With German reunification in 1990, the communist resistance narrative disappeared as a state doctrine and was critically scrutinised, but in today's Germany, the internal communist resistance is not ignored and has its place alongside other resistance groups. Similar to France, the rescue of Jews today plays a central role in the public perception of resistance in Germany.

*The questions were asked by Nicolas Moll*



# WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



HISTORIJSKI MUZEJ  
BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE

crossborder  
factory



cife

SPOMEN PODRUČJE **jasenovac** MEMORIAL SITE

Funded by:



Federal Ministry  
of Finance



Foundation  
**evz** Remembrance  
Responsibility  
Future

on the basis of a decision  
of the Bundestag



9 789958 956980