



# WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on  
Resistance in Europe during  
World War II

Edited by

Elma Hašimbegović, Nicolas Moll and Ivo Pejaković

## Raymond Schmittlein and Irène Giron: Two Crossed Trajectories in the French Resistance

*Corine Defrance*

Irène Giron (*née* Roman, 1910-1988) and Raymond Schmittlein (1904-1974) met for the first time at the French National Liberation Commissariat (*Commissariat français de la Libération nationale* – CFLN) in Algiers in November 1943. Their two trajectories converged in the service of Combat, one of the most important French Resistance movements and General Charles de Gaulle’s main relay in North Africa. For eight years, until 1951, they worked together in the Resistance and, after the end of the war, in the French military government in Germany (active from 1945 to 1949) and then in the French High Commission in Germany (which lasted from 1949 to 1955). They were both responsible for education (Heads of the Department of Public Education and then the Department of Cultural Affairs from 1949): he as director, she as deputy director. Schmittlein returned to France in June 1951 after being elected to the National Assembly as a Gaullist deputy for the Territory of Belfort. Giron ensured the transition with a new team and returned to France, at her request, at the end of 1951.

Apart from the connection between the Resistance and the post-war French occupation of Germany that links these two individuals, there are many similarities in their biographies. Both spent their childhoods in binational families; both had German roots, spoke German and had a remarkable knowledge of Germany; both founded families with partners of a nationality other than their own; and above all, Schmittlein and Giron became aware very early of the Nazi regime’s anti-Semitic and expansionist nature and clearly expressed their rejection of the Nazi takeover on Europe. How did these factors influence their involvement in the Resistance and their careers as Resistance fighters?<sup>1</sup> The historian Robert Frank makes a distinc-

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1 Pierre Laborie, “L’idée de Résistance, entre définition et sens: retour sur un questionnement”, in *Les Français des années troubles. De la guerre d’Espagne à la Libération*, ed. Pierre Laborie (Paris: Le Seuil, 2003) 65-80.

tion between transnationality and internationality: “International phenomena and relationships are or become transnational when they transcend not the state dimension, but the limits of national identities, when processes of identification with others are put in place through mechanisms of transfer and reappropriation”.<sup>2</sup> Using this definition, it seems to us that the claim to multiple identities and the ability to commit to international values, because they have a profound impact on players’ feelings of belonging – here Schmittlein and Giron – can be described as transnational ones. This chapter will study the impact of these factors – transnational families and early experiences of Nazi Germany – on the decision to join the resistance and the forms of resistance and willingness to participate in the occupation of Germany in order to contribute to its democratisation.

## Transnational families

When France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, Schmittlein and Irene Giron were aged 35 and 29 respectively. They both belonged to a generation that had lived through World War I as children and came from binational families. Schmittlein was born in Roubaix, in northern France, on 19 June 1904, to an Alsatian mother and a German father born in Mainz and naturalised as a French citizen in 1893.<sup>3</sup> Giron was born in Hamburg on 22 September 1910 to a German mother and a British father. According to the nationality rules in force at the time, she had British nationality.

Their age difference meant that they had significantly different childhood experiences of World War I. Schmittlein was left an orphan in 1915 at the age of 11.<sup>4</sup> He was brought up by an older sister and Catholic institutions: the Collège Saint-Louis in Roubaix and then the junior seminary in

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2 Robert Frank, “Émotions mondiales, internationales et transnationales, 1822-1932”, *Monde(s)*, no. 1 (Mai 2012): 67; *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, eds. Pierre-Yves Saunier and Akira Iriye (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

3 National Archives/*Archives Nationales* – AN (Pierrefitte), “dossier de naturalisation de Charles Ferdinand Schmittlein, BB/11/2183, extract no 9439x88”. The request was submitted in 1888 and Charles Schmittlein was naturalised by decree in 1893.

4 Manon Pignot, “Expériences enfantines du deuil pendant et après la Grande Guerre”, *Histoire@Politique*, no 3 (November-December 2007); Stéphane Audouin-Rouzeau, *La guerre des enfants 1914-1918. Essai d'histoire culturelle* (Paris: Colin, 1993); Stéphane Audouin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18, Retrouver la guerre*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

Haubourdin.<sup>5</sup> For four years, he lived in a region occupied by the Germans. As Manon Pignot points out, “the occupied zone constitutes [...] a specific place and time from the point of view of children’s experience of war”.<sup>6</sup> Annette Becker has described the occupied northern zone as the “laboratory of total war”, because the region was so significantly affected: not only was the occupation regime particularly rigorous, with numerous requisitions, deportations and forced labour, but various atrocities, looting and rapes terrorised civilians and traumatised children.<sup>7</sup> Schmittlein himself experienced the evacuation of children from the northern zone and his older brothers’ involvement in the conflict. His childhood was rough and shaped by the war.

In 1924, he interrupted his higher education at the *Missions Étrangères* in Paris (a Catholic College preparing missionaries)<sup>8</sup> to do military service as a *Zouave* in the Army of the Rhine, near Wiesbaden. At that time, France occupied the west bank of the Rhine with some bridgeheads on the right side, as it had since 1918. He then entered the Reserve Officers’ School.<sup>9</sup> When he left, he joined as an officer fighting in the Rif War, a colonial war that Spain and then France were conducting in Morocco.<sup>10</sup> Seriously wounded at the

5 Diocesan Archives/*Archives diocésaines* (Lille), dossier 1H231 (petit séminaire d’Haubourdin), 1908-1968; Corine Defrance, “Raymond Schmittlein (1904-1974): Leben und Werk eines französischen Gründungsaters der Universität Mainz”, in *Ut omnes unum sint (Teil 1) Die Gründungs-  
persönlichkeiten der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität der Universität Mainz*, eds. Michael Kissener and Helmut Mathy (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), 11-30.

6 Manon Pignot, “Expériences enfantines d’occupation pendant la Grande Guerre: pratiques et représentations à travers le cas français”, *Revue européenne d’histoire sociale Histoire & Sociétés*, no 17 (2006): 19; *Enfants en guerre. “Sans famille” dans les conflits du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*, eds. Laura Hobson Faure, Manon Pignot and Antoine Rivière, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2023).

7 Larissa Wegner, *Occupatio Bellica. Die deutsche Armee in Nordfrankreich 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2023); James E. Connolly, *The experience of occupation in the Nord, 1914-18. Living with the enemy in First-World-War-France* (Manchester: Manchesterhive, 2018); Annette Becker, *Les cicatrices rouges, 14-18. France et Belgique occupées* (Paris: Fayard, 2010); Annette Becker, “Life in an Occupied Zone: Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing”, in *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced*, eds. Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (London: Cooper, 1996), 630-641; Philippe Nivet, *La France occupée, 1914-1918* (Paris: Colin, 2011); Philippe Nivet, *Les boches du Nord* (Paris: Economica, 2004).

8 Archives of the Foreign Missions of Paris/*Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris* – MEP, DB 4011L, Letter from Raymond Schmittlein to the MEP, 16 May 1922; Corine Defrance, “Raymond Schmittlein”, in *Dictionnaire du Monde religieux dans la France contemporaine*, vol. 12, *Franche-Comté*, eds. Laurent Ducerf, Vincent Petit and Manuel Tramaux (Paris: Beauchesne, 2016), 674-675.

9 Historical Service of the French Defence/*Service Historique de la Défense* – SHD (Vincennes), “dossier personnel Raymond Schmittlein, état des services”.

10 C. R. Peennell, *A Country with a Government and a Flag. The Rif War in Morocco, 1921-1926*, (Oxford: Middle East and North African Studies Press Ltd., 1986); Mathieu Marly, “La guerre du Rif (1921-1926), une guerre coloniale?”, *Encyclopédie d’histoire numérique de l’Europe*, <https://ehne.fr/fr/node/21489>. All internet sources were last accessed 6 November 2023.

end of 1925, he was repatriated to France. He abandoned theology, presumably for disciplinary reasons, for German studies at the Sorbonne, as he had been bilingual since childhood. He successfully passed the *agrégation* – the competitive examination required to become a secondary school teacher in France – in German in 1932 and became a teacher at a lycée in Chartres.

Irene Giron grew up in a wealthy protestant family that was also affected by the war. Her father, Walter Roman, a coffee trader in Hamburg, was interned as a civilian in Ruhleben near Berlin from 1914 until 1918 because he was British. When he was released, he moved to London with his family. Irene attended school there for two years. The family returned to Hamburg in 1920 and Irene attended a secondary school for girls (*Mädchen-realschule*). In 1927, her father committed suicide when his business went bankrupt.<sup>11</sup> The economic situation of the mother and her two children was difficult and the family moved to Hesse, where she completed her schooling and passed her secondary school leaving certificate (*Reifeprüfung*) in 1930 at the *Reinhardswaldschule* in Kassel-Land.<sup>12</sup> Fully bilingual, she initially studied German and art history, with minor specialities in history and journalism, at the universities of Heidelberg and Hamburg.<sup>13</sup> When she registered at Hamburg in the winter semester of 1931/32, she indicated that she wanted to study to become a journalist.<sup>14</sup> She studied in France from autumn 1932 to autumn 1933.<sup>15</sup> At the time, 28 percent of Sorbonne students were women, 15-20 percent of whom were foreign nationals.<sup>16</sup> This was more than in Germany, where in 1932/33, across all universities and all disciplines, only 18.6 percent of those registered at university were female.<sup>17</sup> So even if Giron was not exactly a pioneer, her student career was still very atypical for women of her generation. This reflects the trajectory

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11 Charles Giron, interviews with the author, Paris, 1992-1994.

12 University Archive Heidelberg/*Universitätsarchiv Heidelberg* – UA Heidelberg, StudA Roman, Irene (1933), handwritten note from Irene Roman, 4 May 1932.

13 *Ibid.*, StudA Roman, Irene (1933), Anmeldung zur Immatrikulation an der Universität Heidelberg, 13 November 1930.

14 University Archive Hamburg/*Universitätarchiv Hamburg*, Roman, Irene G23368, form dated 30 October 1931.

15 UA Heidelberg, StudA Roman, Irene (1933).

16 Carole Christen-Lécuyer, “Les premières étudiantes de l’Université de Paris”, *Travail, genre et sociétés* 4, no 2, (2000), 35-50.

17 Lothar Mertens, “Die Entwicklung des Frauenstudiums in Deutschland bis 1945”, *APuZ* 28, 1989, <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/archiv/534903/die-entwicklung-des-frauenstudiums-in-deutschland-bis-1945/>.

of a brilliant, independent young woman with deep interest in analysing contemporary realities, keen to prepare for her professional career.

## Education and early experiences of Nazi Germany

Irene Giron and Raymond Schmittlein had decisive early experiences of Nazism and of the Nazi regime. These experiences shaped their path towards the Resistance.

Schmittlein's first direct contact with Germany dates back to when he was studying for his degree in German studies. He went to Berlin in 1931/32 to prepare for the *agrégation*, financing his stay by teaching French at the Berlitz School. It was there that he met a German woman, Gerta Eichholz, whom he married in spring 1932. During his stay in Berlin, he observed with concern the rise of nationalism, militarism and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). Meeting the Catholic historian and writer Jean de Pange, he confessed to being pessimistic about Germany's future.<sup>18</sup> In the Reichstag elections of 31 July 1932, the NSDAP made a spectacular breakthrough, becoming the largest party with 37,3 percent of the vote. The NSDAP had not only won over a significant number of voters who had previously voted for the other parties, but had also managed to attract first-time voters as well as a large number of people who traditionally did not vote. And for the Reichstag elections in November 1932, despite support dropping to 33,1 percent, the NSDAP organised SA marches in Berlin and Brandenburg, demonstrating their power in the capital.

Schmittlein's career then took him to the Baltic states. After obtaining his *agrégation*, he began a PhD in linguistics at the Sorbonne and chose to work on Baltic languages, in particular Lithuanian, which was considered at the time to be one of the languages close to the so-called Indo-European origins. This is why he applied to be a lecturer in French at the University of Kaunas.<sup>19</sup> Schmittlein and his family moved to the then-Lithuanian capital in the autumn of 1934. In addition to working at the university, he became

18 Jean de Pange, *Journal (1931-1933)* (Paris: Grasset, 1967), 20 December 1931 and 8 January 1932, 80-86.

19 Lithuanian Central State Archives/*Lietuvos Centrinis Valstybės Archyvas* (Vilnius), 631/1 vol. 636, "curriculum vitae de R. Schmittlein"; see also the book resulting from his PhD research, a PhD that he never completed and defended): Raymond Schmittlein, *Études sur la nationalité des Aestii* (Bade: Editions Art et science, 1948).

involved in the Lithuanian-French Society and helped to develop cultural relations between the two countries to ensure the “influence of France” in a region that had not always been immune to German influences.<sup>20</sup> The beginning of his career was therefore already marked by Franco-German rivalry. What is more, as soon as he arrived in Kaunas, the French press agency Havas recruited him as a correspondent.<sup>21</sup> Among other things, he reported on the rise of Nazi influence in Klaipėda/Memel. Early on, he understood the danger that Nazism represented for the European democracies, due to Hitler’s expansionist aims. Well aside from his cultural mission and even his role as press correspondent, Schmittlein informed Paris in 1935 about German troop movements on the border between East Prussia and Lithuania.<sup>22</sup>

Giron had a very different career path, although there were some similarities. While studying at the Sorbonne in 1932/33, she met a young lawyer, Charles Giron, who later became her husband. In autumn 1933, she returned to Germany, where she enrolled at the Institute for Translation and Interpreting (*Dolmetscher-Institut*) at the University of Heidelberg. In October 1934, she graduated with top honours as a trilingual translator and interpreter of German, English and French.<sup>23</sup> This institute was one of the first structures at the University of Heidelberg to bring itself into line with Nazi government objectives, a process known as *Selbstgleichschaltung*.<sup>24</sup> Recent studies have highlighted the extent to which the role of interpreter’s training and profession was politically sensitive; a large part of the interpreter-translator community placed hope in the “Third Reich” to obtain a professional status.<sup>25</sup> The Nazi regime needed ideologically reliable men

20 Corine Defrance, “Raymond Schmittlein (1904-1974): médiateur entre la France et la Lituanie”, *Cahiers Litvaniens*, no 9, (Autumn 2008): 18-23, <http://www.cahiers-litvaniens.org/Schmittlein.htm>; Julien Gueslin, “La France et les petits États baltes: réalités baltes, perceptions françaises et ordre européen (1920-1932)”, (unpublished PhD diss., University of Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2004), <https://theses.hal.science/tel-00126331>; Vyngantas Vareikis, “Deutsch-litauische Beziehungen in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts”, *Annaberger Annalen*, no. 5 (1997): 6-25.

21 Antoine Lefébure, *Havas. Les arcanes du pouvoir*, (Paris: Grasset, 1992) 240-247; AN, 5AR/386 & 387 [agence Havas] dossiers Raymond Schmittlein.

22 The Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office/*Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes* (Berlin), R 484947, Brief vom Reichspostminister an das Auswärtiges Amt, 1 February 1935.

23 UA Heidelberg, StudA Roman, Irene (1933), registration form dated 14 November 1933; K-VI-51/72-1, Dolmetscher-Institut, Prüfungsangelegenheiten, 1931-1937, Protokoll der Prüfungsausschuss – Schlussitzung am. 12 October 1934.

24 Kilian Peter Schultes, “Die Staats- und Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät der Universität Heidelberg 1934-1946” (PhD diss. University of Heidelberg, 2010), 406.

25 Charlotte Kieslich, *Dolmetschen im Nationalsozialismus: die Reichsfachschaft für das Dolmetscherwesen (RfD)* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2018).

and women for diplomacy, the judiciary, the army, and similar institutions. With the war and the German occupations in Europe, the regime needed such people in very high numbers and the number of students at the *Dolmetscher-Institut* in Heidelberg exploded from 84 in 1934/35 to 643 in 1943.<sup>26</sup> While Giron was studying at Heidelberg, the administrator of the *Dolmetscher-Institut*, Heinz Walz, came under attack from the head of the students' organisation (*Studentenschaftsführer*) who, in the spring of 1934, called for his dismissal because of Walz's Jewish origins.<sup>27</sup>

This case particularly impacted young Irene Giron because of her family situation. Her mother, Alice Scheel, had remarried a German Jew, Walther Hildesheimer, in 1932. Also in 1934, teachers and students at the *Dolmetscher-Institut* demanded that the Nazi ideological line be strengthened and denounced the excessive weight of Romance languages at the expense of Germanic ones. According to a former Heidelberg student, the female interpreters and translators were particularly indoctrinated: "Our female guides were largely recruited from the female interpreters. One of the reasons was probably that the interpreters were mostly really NS. [...]. You couldn't get enough foreign language experts for the border service and for checking letters."<sup>28</sup>

Giron probably went to London after graduating and attended the London School of Economics, where she obtained a certificate, as she later attested to the French authorities.<sup>29</sup> According to Charles Giron's testimony, Irene came back to Germany and then worked for two or three years for various German companies as a translator and interpreter.<sup>30</sup> We have no further information about her motivations. Giron's mother and stepfather managed to emigrate to South Africa in 1937 to escape anti-Semitic persecution in Nazi Germany. Irene decided to join them. These were very difficult years for the family. Walther died in January 1939. According to Alice's

26 Schultes, "Die Staats- und Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät", 409.

27 Ibid., 153.

28 Ibid., 409.

29 No file for an "Irene Roman", as her name would have been at the time, has been found in the LSE archives, which is not unusual for a student who only passed a certificate at this institution. Correspondence between the author and Daniel Payne, Curator for politics and international relations, LSE Library, London, 19 and 20 May, 2022.

30 Giron, interviews with the author, Paris, 1992-1994; Corine Defrance, "Bericht aus einer verlorengegangenen Quelle: Der Weg Irène Girons in die Französische Militärregierung (1910 bis 1945)", in *Ut omnes unum sint (Teil 1) Die Gründungspersönlichkeiten der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität der Universität Mainz*, eds. Michael Kissener and Helmut Mathy (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2005), 43-55.



correspondence, Irene Giron worked for two years as a journalist for two newspapers and magazines published by the Union Magazine publishing company: *Monthly Diary of events* and *Pleasure*. Her employer wrote an excellent review.<sup>31</sup> There is no doubt that this experience of journalism and editorial responsibilities was invaluable for the young woman's future work in editing and producing *Combat-Algérie*, the press organ of the *Combat* resistance movement in North Africa.

## Joining the Resistance and Resistance activities

In the summer of 1938, Schmittlein was reassigned to Latvia as a teacher at the French lycée (*Lycée français*) and director of the French Institute (*Institut français*) in Riga. When war was declared in September 1939, he was mobilised there as head of the French intelligence services in the Baltic. In December, at a time when the Latvian Republic was more fragile than ever, caught between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which had already forced it to accept the installation of military bases on its territory, Schmittlein was arrested by the police for espionage in the port of Riga.<sup>32</sup> Expelled from the country after spending two weeks in Latvian jails, he left at the beginning of January 1940 for the French embassy in Stockholm, where he observed the Wehrmacht's advance into Norway. Schmittlein joined the Free French (*Français Libres*) in July 1940.<sup>33</sup> From Stockholm, Schmittlein joined the Free French organisation and his registration was symbolically

31 Private Irène Giron fonds, formerly consulted by Charles Giron (1994): "Miss Roman has shown her great gifts for journalism and her discernment and initiative in editing [...] Owing to her sound judgement, her personality and the originality of her ideas in both the editorial and the commercial side, she has, after a few months' work, created for herself a position for more independent and responsible than the one primarily assigned to her in this concern"; Defrance, "Bericht aus einer verlorengegangenen Quelle: Der Weg Irène Girons in die Französische Militärregierung (1910 bis 1945)".

32 Latvian State Historical Archive/*Latvijas Nacionālais arhīvs* – LVA (Riga), Nr. 2570/3 vol. 1250; Jean de Beausse, *Carnets d'un diplomate français en Lettonie, 1939-1940* (Riga: Liesma, 1997).

33 Corine Defrance, "Raymond Schmittlein: un itinéraire dans la France Libre, entre activités militaires et diplomatiques" *Relations Internationales*, no 108 (2001): 487-501; Corine Defrance, "Raymond Schmittlein" in *Ut omnes unum sint (Teil 1) Die Gründungspersönlichkeiten der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität der Universität Mainz*, eds. Michael Kissener and Helmut Mathy (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005); see also private Raymond Schmittlein fonds, by his son Raymond Schmittlein (junior), consulted 2001; Jean-François Muracciole, *Les Français libres. L'Autre Résistance* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009); *Dictionnaire de la France libre*, eds. François Broche, Georges Caïtucoli and Jean-François Muracciole, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2010).

dated 14 July (the French national day). He was thus one of the very first Frenchmen to join the Resistance organised from abroad by de Gaulle.

In July 1940, only 7.000 people had joined the Free French Forces (*Forces Françaises Libres* – FFL), a movement that at its peak, had 53.000 members. Schmittlein did not fit the profile of most of the first Free French, more than two-thirds of whom were under 30 years old, single and poorly educated. The fact that he was already abroad and had been working for France from abroad for six years certainly contributed to this extremely early decision. According to research on the motivations for joining the FFL, the main reason was patriotism, while a sense of adventure, ideology, fear of persecution and training by comrades also played a more or less important role, depending on the time of enlistment.<sup>34</sup> As with most Free Frenchmen (joining the Resistance was often a discreet affair), Schmittlein left no account of his reasons for joining the FFL in July 1940, but there is no doubt that patriotism and rejection of Nazi ideology were powerful driving forces. On De Gaulle's orders, who was organising the Resistance from outside metropolitan France, Schmittlein made the long and complicated journey to Palestine where he set up a Free French radio station in Haifa to counter the Vichy regime's propaganda in Syria and Lebanon with another diplomat and early Resistance fighter, François Coulet.<sup>35</sup>

The Middle East was a priority area of operation for De Gaulle and the external resistance. Schmittlein then took part in disarmament operations in Syria and Lebanon after Vichy troops were defeated by British troops helped by FFL.<sup>36</sup> In March 1942, De Gaulle nominated him as the Free French diplomatic representative in the USSR. He was the number two in the mission led by Roger Garreau and relocated with the Soviet government to Kuibyshev (today Samara).<sup>37</sup> In the USSR, he played an important role in ensuring

34 "Who were the Free French", Chemins de mémoire, Ministère des Armées, <https://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/en/who-were-free-french>; François Broche, Georges Caïtucoli and Jean-François Muracciole, *La France au Combat: de l'appel du 18 juin à la Victoire* (Paris: Perrin, 2007).

35 François Coulet, *Vertu des temps difficiles* (Paris: Plon, 1966).

36 Antoine Hokayem, "La France et le Levant de 1940 à 1943: l'indépendance du Liban et de la Syrie", *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* no. 48, (1994): 83-118; Maurice Albord, *L'Armée française et les États du Levant: 1936-1946* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2000); Jérôme Bocquet, "La France Libre, de Gaulle et le Liban" in *Le Cèdre et le chêne. De Gaulle et le Liban*, eds. Clotilde de Fouchécour and Karim Emile Bitar (Paris: Geuthner, 2015), 118-119.

37 François Lévêque, "Les relations entre l'Union soviétique et la France Libre (juin 1941-septembre 1942)" in *De Gaulle et la Russie*, ed. Maurice Vaïsse (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2006), 17-31; Henri-Christian Giraud, *De Gaulle et les Communistes*, 2 vol., (Paris: Albin Michel: 1988/1989); Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Le général de Gaulle et la Russie* (Paris: Fayard, 2017).

that the *Malgré-nous* – men from Alsace and Lorraine who had been forcibly conscripted into the Wehrmacht – were separated from the German soldiers who were prisoners of war of the Soviets. This led to the creation of the Tambov camp, setting up a squadron of French airmen to fight alongside the Red Army on the Eastern Front – the *Normandie-Niemen* – and in negotiating diplomatic recognition of the CFLN set up by De Gaulle in Algiers.<sup>38</sup> Schmittlein received this recognition from Molotov in August 1943. In November 1943, De Gaulle called him back to Algiers to join the CFLN.

When war was declared, Irene Giron left Johannesburg to travel by sea on a Dutch cargo ship to her fiancé in Paris. It was a long and perilous crossing to Le Havre.<sup>39</sup> When she arrived in Paris in November 1939, Charles Giron had been mobilised. In May 1940, he served in the 4th Armoured Division (*division cuirassée*) led by De Gaulle. Charles Giron served De Gaulle as a lieutenant until De Gaulle left for London on 17 June 1940. From December 1939, Irene Giron analysed German broadcasts and Nazi propaganda at the *Centre d'Écoute de la Radiodiffusion Nationale*.<sup>40</sup> She resigned on the very day of the armistice, 22 June 1940, which was characteristic of the early Resistance fighters and of De Gaulle's followers. They recognised the military defeat but refused the armistice – a political act – while France still had an army and an empire from which they wanted to continue the fight.<sup>41</sup>

Married in Le Puy in southern France at the end of September 1940, the Girons joined one of the first resistance movements in the *Massif Central*,<sup>42</sup> the *Petites Ailes*, founded by General Gabriel Cochet. Once more, we do not have a document to understand her motivations. But it is clear that she wanted to resist against Nazi Germany and its ideology. Her trajectory – with her decision to leave South Africa and go to France after the declaration of war and her symbolic resignation from her job on the day of the armistice – shows that she came to Europe to fight against the Nazi aggression and that her entry into the Resistance was not simply the act of a wife “supporting” her husband. On the other hand, did their decision to

38 Jacques Bariéty and Corine Defrance, “Les missions de la France libre en Union soviétique et les ‘Malgré nous’, 1942–1944”, *Revue d'Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande* 39, no. 4 (2007): 549–566.

39 Private Irène Giron fonds, Correspondence between Alice Scheel, Irène Giron's mother and Eva Hildesheimer, her stepdaughter; Defrance, “Bericht aus einer verlorengegangenen Quelle: Der Weg Irène Girons in die Französische Militärregierung (1910 bis 1945)”.

40 Giron, interviews with the author, Paris, 1992–1994.

41 Jean-François Muracciole, *Histoire de la Résistance en France* (Paris: PUF, 2020), 7.

42 A highland area in south-central France.

marry facilitate their joint underground work? Did it allow her to go more unnoticed than the presence of a young British woman would have done in Vichy France? The sources do not provide a clear answer to this question.

While initially loyal to Marshal Pétain, Cochet was what is known as a *vichysto-résistant*,<sup>43</sup> meaning that he was first loyal to the Vichy Regime, but at the same time, supported the Resistance. Indeed, he was one of the first to sign calls for Resistance distributed in the form of leaflets to the armistice army.<sup>44</sup> Irène Giron was in charge of propaganda and writing a clandestine leaflet, *Petites Ailes de France*,<sup>45</sup> initially created in the northern zone, then taken over in the southern zone by the Resistance fighter Henri Frenay from mid-May 1941.<sup>46</sup> It was the forerunner of the underground newspaper *Combat*. Towards the end of 1940, the first Resistance fighters began to pool their efforts and set up the first movements and networks on a political or professional basis.<sup>47</sup> However, it is still necessary to speak of the Resistances in the plural, given the diversity of currents. The Resistance was still very much in the minority, as French society was Petainist and openly hostile to the first Resistance fighters.<sup>48</sup> In 1951, the French High Commissioner in Germany, André François-Poncet, testified that Irène Giron had created “the first meshes of a Resistance network in the Massif Central, ensuring liaison herself, gathering the information requested, drafting and distributing leaflets against the enemy”.<sup>49</sup>

Wanted by the Gestapo, the Girones fled to North Africa in May 1941. Perhaps this was because it was more difficult to find them there, despite the fact that the region was loyal to Marshal Pétain at the time,<sup>50</sup> or

43 Sébastien Albertelli and Johanna Barasz, “Un résistant atypique: le général Cochet, entre vichysme et gaullisme”, *Histoire@Politique*, no. 5 (2008). <https://www.cairn.info/revue-histoire-politique-2008-2-page-9.htm>.

44 Muracciole, *Résistance*, 9, 35, 75; Harry Roderick Kedward, *Naissance de la Résistance dans la France de Vichy, 1940-1942. Idées et motivations* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1989).

45 French Diplomatic Archives/*Archives diplomatiques françaises* – ADF, (La Courneuve), dossier de carrière d’Irène Giron, 20 May 1947.

46 Bruno Leroux, “La presse clandestine d’une guerre à l’autre, en France et en Belgique”, *La Lettre de la Fondation de la Résistance*, no. 79 (December 2014), <http://museedelaresistanceenligne.org/media10355-iLes-Petites-Ailes-i-journal-clandestin-cr-par-Jacques-Yves-Mulliez-en-septembre-1940>.

47 Muracciole, *Résistance*, 9.

48 Ibid., 14.

49 ADF, dossier de carrière d’Irène Giron, “proposition de nomination de Madame Irène Emilie Giron, née Roman au grade de Chevalier dans l’Ordre national de la Légion d’honneur au titre de la Résistance”, André François-Poncet, 18 July 1951.

50 Irène’s mother, in her correspondence with Eva Hildesheimer, refers to mid-May 1941 (letter of 26 July 1941, Private Irène Giron Fonds).

maybe because the Resistance and particularly De Gaulle wanted to establish a presence in these parts of the French empire. Irène and Charles Giron worked for *Combat*. *Combat* was one of the first and most important resistance movements created in Lyon in autumn 1940 by Henri Frenay and his companion Berty Albrecht.<sup>51</sup> From spring 1941, *Combat* expanded into North Africa. In Algiers, one of its main leaders, René Capitant, set up a local edition of the underground newspaper under the name *Combat-Algérie*.<sup>52</sup> Initially it was a handwritten and later a typed clandestine newspaper. In its 1 December 1942 edition, *Combat-Algérie* presented itself as “the irreconcilable enemy of the Vichy regime. It considers the armistice a betrayal and a dishonour. [...] *Combat* is fighting for the liberation of France. By this it means its liberation not only from the invader, but also from the tyrants who usurped power through defeat and hold on to it with the support of the enemy”.<sup>53</sup>

At Capitant’s side, Irène Giron consolidated the clandestine movement in Algeria and Morocco and took charge of the organisation of *Combat-Algérie*. She was responsible for the newspaper’s editorial secretariat and the movement’s secretariat.<sup>54</sup> Since the French authorities loyal to Vichy learned about her underground activities, she had to leave and went to Morocco.<sup>55</sup> She was involved in the immediate aftermath of the Allied landings in North Africa – Operation Torch – on 8 November 1942 which led in the next months to the liberation of large parts of Algeria and Morocco. In Morocco, Irène Giron set up channels for young French fighters to pass through Spain to Tunisia, where the FFL and the Allies were engaged in fierce fighting with the German Africa Corps (*Afrika Korps*).<sup>56</sup>

51 Sebastien Albertelli, Julien Blanc and Laurent Douzou, *La lutte clandestine en France* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), 33; Robert Belot, *Henri Frenay. De la Résistance à l’Europe* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2003). See Robert Belot’s article in this volume.

52 Muracciole, *Résistance*, 40.

53 *Combat-Algérie*, no 101, 12 March 1944, “Fidèles à nous-mêmes”. – AN (645 AP) – René Capitant Fonds.

54 René Capitant Fonds at the AN (645 AP) enables us to retrace some of Irène Giron’s activities during this period. It also contains an almost complete collection of *Combat-Algérie*.

55 “At the beginning of 1942, to escape the North African militia [the feared legionnaires’ order service, SOL], she went to Morocco”, André François-Poncet attests, 18 July 1951, ADF, “dossier de carrière d’Irène Giron”.

56 François-Poncet reports that she “contributed, through her personal action, to the preparation of [this] landing. She organised the reception centres in Tunis, Algiers, Oran and Casablanca for the FFI and set up the chain of volunteers that led young French Resistance fighters from France via Spain to Leclerc and Koenig’s Free French divisions”, André François-Poncet attests, 18 July 1951, ADF, “dossier de carrière d’Irène Giron”.

The months following the landing were difficult for Combat and the Gaullist resistance. The U.S. was distrustful of an unelected general who President Franklin Delano Roosevelt suspected of dictatorial designs, especially as De Gaulle was inflexible and often rebelled against the decisions that the U.S. wanted to impose. Washington imposed Admiral Darlan in Algiers, who had been Pétain's head of government from February 1941 to April 1942 and had helped to commit the regime to collaboration.<sup>57</sup> All the Resistance groups were outraged and Darlan's designation had the countereffect of facilitating the unification of the Resistance.<sup>58</sup> Initially, for *Combat-Algérie*, this nomination meant repression and a return to the underground.<sup>59</sup> It was only after Darlan's assassination on 24 December 1942 and replacement by General Henri Giraud, imposed once again by the Americans in an attempt to avoid De Gaulle, that *Combat-Algérie* was able to resurface openly.

After De Gaulle established himself in Algiers on 30 May 1943 and the CFLN was founded on 3 June, Giron worked as a press officer in the office of the National Education Commissioner, René Capitant.<sup>60</sup> This is where she first crossed paths with Schmittlein, who had also been appointed to the National Education Commission on his return from the Soviet Union.<sup>61</sup> Giron and Schmittlein also worked together within the Combat movement: she was a member of the steering committee and he was the general secretary for North Africa. Together they organised the tour of a documentary exhibition entitled "Kollaboration", organised by *Combat-Algérie* in March 1944.<sup>62</sup> The exhibition consists of thematic panels showing extracts from

57 Muracciole, *Résistance*, 42; Christine Levisse-Touzé, *L'Afrique du Nord dans la guerre, 1939-1945* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

58 Guillaume Piketty, "La France combattante au cœur du maelström", in *8 novembre 1942. Résistance et débarquement allié en Afrique du Nord. Dynamiques historiques, politiques et socio-culturelles*, eds. Nicole Cohen-Addad, Aïssa Kadri and Tramor Quemeneur (Vulaines-sur-Seine: Editions du Croquant, 2021).

59 *Combat-Algérie*, editorial, 21 January 1943 – AN (645 AP): "We are once again using roneo to distribute our newspaper. We are being hounded again, as in the worst days of the Vichy dictatorship. Our printing house is being watched and our issues confiscated. They want to silence us and make us powerless. [...] We are being attacked because we are appealing for the arrival of General de Gaulle, who has promised us freedom and the Republic, and who will give it back to us. They are after us because we are republicans and we want freedom".

60 AN, F/17/29322, Commissariat à l'Éducation Nationale, Alger, dossier Irène Giron, "fiche de renseignements".

61 AN, F17/13335, Commissariat à l'Éducation Nationale, projet Schmittlein concernant l'enseignement du second degré (no date).

62 *Combat-Algérie*, "L'inauguration de l'exposition Kollaboration", n° 103, 26 March 1944 – AN (645 AP).

collaboration newspapers, posters and photographs with critical commentaries. The aim was to denounce the collaboration of the Vichy regime and demand the purging of those who had served that regime. This *épuration* had already begun in liberated North Africa in 1943. Now the process of purging those mainly responsible of the Vichy regime in metropolitan France had to be prepared. Giron, along with Schmittlein, was commissioned to promote the exhibition in the rest of North Africa and in Tunis in particular.

Giron returned to Paris in September 1944 after its liberation. Schmittlein had volunteered to go to the front. He landed at Toulon in August 1944 with the First Army under General de Lattre de Tassigny. He took part in the fighting to liberate France, making his way up the Rhône valley and distinguishing himself during the liberation of Belfort.<sup>63</sup>

### **Continuing the mission in occupied Germany (1945-1951)**

In July 1945, the French military government in Germany was set up and Capitant, now Minister of National Education, appointed Schmittlein and Giron to head the Department of Public Education (DEP), Schmittlein as director, Giron as deputy because both were resistant fighters, remarkable experts on Germany and its educational and cultural system and both spoke perfect German. Their main mission was the “re-education of the German people”, i.e. the denazification *and* the democratisation of Germany.<sup>64</sup> Young people, whose “chains had to be broken”,<sup>65</sup> were the main focus of their action, in order to ensure the future of a democratic Germany and peace on the continent.

In Algiers, Schmittlein had already taken part in commissions to reform the French education system and, in particular, to set up the future National

63 Schmittlein describes his campaign in France in his book: *La Nationale 83. Extraits d'un carnet de route*, (Mayence: Editions Art et Science, 1951).

64 Raymond Schmittlein, “La rééducation du peuple allemande”, in *La dénazification par les vainqueurs. La politique culturelle des occupants en Allemagne, 1945-1949*, ed. Jérôme Vaillant (Lille: PUL, 1981), 139-145; Corine Defrance, *La politique culturelle de la France sur la rive gauche du Rhin (1945-1955)* (Strasbourg: PUS, 1994); Corine Defrance, “Rééducation du peuple allemande”, in *Encyclopédie de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, eds. Guillaume Piketty and Jean-François Muracciole (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2015), 1094-1096.

65 Raymond Schmittlein, “Briser les chaînes de la jeunesse allemande”, *France-Illustration*, no. 205 (September 1949): 17.

School of Administration (*École nationale d'administration* – ENA). These thoughts in 1944 inspired his plans for the French zone in Germany after 1945.<sup>66</sup> His project was characterised by a distrust of traditional universities, which were considered nationalist and above all by a desire to create something new rather than attempt to radically reform what already existed. In the French zone, Schmittlein and Giron founded a new university in Mainz, inaugurated in May 1946,<sup>67</sup> a high school of administration in Speyer and an interpreting institute in Germersheim, both opened in January 1947, an institute of European history and an academy of science and literature in Mainz, created in 1950.<sup>68</sup>

Officially, the establishments in Speyer and Germersheim were intended to quickly train “qualified civil servants” at a time when *épuration* had further exacerbated the shortage of administrative staff. They were also intended to “break the monopoly of lawyers”, who Schmittlein considered to be “Prussianised”. According to the DEP, the persistence of lawyers in the administration under Weimar had hindered democracy and the republic.<sup>69</sup> It was therefore necessary to open up an alternative training system for administrators, as well as for interpreters and administrators.<sup>70</sup> The Speyer Institute was inspired by the plan to create the ENA in Paris.

It is important to emphasise the extent to which the post-war period, the reforms and in particular the desire to democratise the functioning of societies, was prepared by the Resistance during the war. In the early 1950s, the German Foreign Ministry (*Auswärtiges Amt*) commissioned the school to provide part of the training for the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)'s young diplomats. Although the Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU) was

66 Stefan Zauner, *Erziehung und Kulturmission. Frankreichs Bildungspolitik in Deutschland 1945-1949* (München: Oldenbourg, 1994).

67 Corine Defrance, “Das Wunder von Mainz: Die Franzosen und die Gründung der JGU”, in *75 Jahre Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz. Universität in der demokratischen Gesellschaft* (Regensburg: Verlag Schnell & Steiner, 2021), 43-55, <https://openscience.ub.uni-mainz.de/handle/20.500.12030/9166>.

68 Corine Defrance, “Mainz in der französischen Kulturpolitik, 1945-1951”, *Mainzer Zeitschrift, Mittelrheinisches Jahrbuch für Archäologie, Kunst und Geschichte*, 98 (2003): 73-84.

69 Corine Defrance, “La politique culturelle”, ed. Corine Defrance. *Les Alliés occidentaux et les universités allemandes, 1945-1949* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000).

70 Peter Schunck, “Irène Giron (1910-1988) und die Gründung der Mainzer Universität”, in *Ut omnes unum sint (Teil 1) Die Gründungspersönlichkeiten der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität der Universität Mainz*, eds. Michael Kissener and Helmut Mathy (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), 31-42; Peter Schunck, *Dokumente zur Geschichte der Dolmetscherhoschule Germersheim aus den Jahren 1946-1949* (Germersheim: Universität Mainz, 1997).



Schmittlein's "favourite child", Giron was particularly committed to training translators and interpreters at the Germersheim School of Interpreting.<sup>71</sup> She undoubtedly benefited from her own experiences in Heidelberg. She took over the excellent technical language training, with modern facilities, but created "her" school with a radically different spirit: teaching the "living reality of foreign peoples" and encouraging exchange, whereas in 1933/34, the *Dolmetscher-Institut* in Heidelberg taught "knowledge of the enemy" and "German superiority". In 1946, the training Giron had received at the *Dolmetscher-Institut* in Heidelberg was partly a source of inspiration, but above all a counter-model. At one of Giron's last administrative evaluations, in 1950, Schmittlein emphasised: "The success of the institutes in Germersheim and Speyer, where German diplomats are now trained, are particularly attributable to her".<sup>72</sup> The focus was now only on diplomats and Germersheim had just as important a role to play as Speyer. For the Schmittlein and Giron team, the Germersheim interpreting school was to be the favoured training centre for interpreters and translators for the new German diplomacy. Without being explicitly stated, the aim was to compete with the Heidelberg interpreting institute, which had failed under the Nazi regime. Irène Giron's personal background, her anti-Nazi commitment and her experience of exile and the Resistance led her to rethink the profession of interpreter on the basis of democratic principles and openness to others, contributing to the (re)emergence of translators and interpreters as cultural mediators.

## Conclusion

Raymond Schmittlein and Irene Giron are examples of transnational trajectories in Resistance, not only because their Resistance activities took them across many borders in Europe and beyond; not only because they joined the fight against aggression by a country with which they both had strong family ties, or, in the Giron's case, because she joined the Resistance in a country of which she was not yet a national. All this was of course important, but their double commitment against the Nazi and Vichy regimes on the one hand and for the democratic renewal of France and Germany on the other, requires a capacity for analysis that goes beyond the national framework. For

71 Defrance, *La politique culturelle*; Schunck, "Irène Giron".

72 ADF, "dossier de carrière d'Irène Giron": job evaluation by R. Schmittlein, 1950.

them, National Socialism and Vichyism belonged, to varying degrees, to the same transnational fascist and anti-liberal movement. Resistance therefore became a transnational act – both of them had friends among the German émigrés and never harboured any hatred for Germans as a whole. This is why they believed that the democratisation of Germany was possible – even when Resistance movements were organised on an essentially national basis. This was especially true for them, because of their origins and the links they forged with the Anglo-American allies for her and the Soviet allies for him. Their mission did not end with the victory over fascism. It logically continued with a commitment to democratisation, above all to offer a future to German youth. Nazi Germany had to be defeated in order to create a democratic Germany. Their actions therefore went beyond the national framework, even if French political and security interests were important in their function within the French military government in Germany.

Their particular trajectory is the result of early experiences of international mobility. This mobility was sometimes desired and sometimes forced, especially during the war, with the hazards and perils of clandestine action. Such mobility was undoubtedly encouraged by bi-national origins, interest in international relations, a remarkable knowledge of several languages and family choices. While an intercultural family may today be an advantage for transnational work, Schmittlein and Giron experienced the mistrust that affected Franco-German or German-British families in the era of nationalism in the interwar period, but obviously not during the years of Resistance. What they had in common was that their involvement in the Resistance was the result of specific and early experiences of Nazism. For Giron, it was her experience of the *Gleichschaltung* of the Translation and Interpreting Institute in Heidelberg, in violation of all humanist values, and, more importantly, her experience of anti-Semitism, which led her to choose exile in 1937 out of solidarity with her family. For Schmittlein, it was the Nazi regime's expansionist and militaristic aims for northeastern Europe that first alerted him to the regime's nature. Another point in common was their immediate decision to serve France from the moment war was declared – one from Riga, the other from Johannesburg – and to refuse “political defeat” in June 1940. Both immediately joined the Resistance, even though the number of Resistance fighters was quite small at the time. They found themselves in Gaullist networks at both ends of Europe and on its margins.

Lastly, they were both largely forgotten figures of the Resistance: she in particular – who ended her public career in 1951 on her return to France. She had apparently been considering a second career as a journalist or broadcaster. Recurring health problems forced her to give it up. In the interviews I conducted in the early 1990s with key players in the French occupation policy in Germany, while preparing my PhD, she was often presented as Schmittlein’s “secretary” in Germany and almost all the witnesses were unaware of the role she had played in the Resistance.

Women’s role in the Resistance has long been overlooked and has received little recognition. Despite this, Giron is one of the 8,5 percent of Resistance Medal awardees who were women, even as according to some estimates, women accounted for at least 15 percent of Resistance fighters). Giron, a particularly discreet personality, never highlighted her work in the Resistance, unlike Schmittlein, who never ceased to take advantage of it. Schmittlein has nevertheless been partly forgotten because he was a marginal and ambiguous figure in Gaullism as a Member of Parliament (as a social left and pro-Israeli Gaullist).<sup>73</sup> After de Gaulle withdrew from politics in 1969, Schmittlein came into conflict with most of his successors. But throughout his political career, which began in 1951 and led him to different positions in government and the parliament, he constantly emphasised his role as a member of the Resistance because it was in those years the most legitimate basis for a political career in France.<sup>74</sup>

Today, in Belfort, a street in a suburban residential area bears the name of Raymond Schmittlein, as does the adjacent bus stop. In June 2023, the main square in front of the JGU in Mainz was named “Irène Giron-Platz” and a plaque with a photograph commemorates her life. The university was keen to pay tribute to the French people who helped to re-found it. Yet it was Schmittlein who was the JGU’s “founding father”, while Irène Giron was the “founding mother” of the Germersheim Interpreting Institute, which had long been part of the JGU. Today, as part of local policies concerned with gender parity in the naming of public spaces, it is Irène Giron’s name that has been put forward by the university and local authorities as a reconstructor and a woman of Anglo-German origin involved in the French Resistance against Nazism.

73 Pierre Viansson-Ponté, *Histoire de la République gaullienne, vol. 1: La fin d'une époque, mai 1958–juillet 1962*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 372.

74 Schmittlein was a long-time deputy for the Territory of Belfort, which he had helped liberate in 1944, briefly Secretary of State for the Associated States and Minister for the Merchant Navy and for many years, Vice President of the National Assembly.

# 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.



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