



# WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on  
Resistance in Europe during  
World War II

Edited by

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## The Mountains as a Place of Resistance: The Case of the French Alps (1943-44)

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The mountain landscapes we enjoy and contemplate throughout Europe are often laden with traces and memories of the confrontations of World War II. Indeed, mountainous areas have played an important role in the history of resistance in Europe, both in terms of acts and of the symbols that still play out in people's imaginations today. Such is the case of the Balkans (a Turkish word for a "forest-covered mountain"), and in particular the Yugoslav mountains, which between 1941 and 1945 were taken over by the communist resistance, the Partisans. For example, Drvar (from the Bosnian word *drvo*, meaning "wood"), located in the western mountains of Bosnia-Herzegovina, was Josip Broz Tito's headquarters in 1944, when the Germans tried and failed to dismantle it through a military attack called *Operation Rösselsprung*. Sanja Horvatinčić's work on the mountains of Croatia, particularly the Drežnica site, attests to the importance of the Partisans' victorious resistance in the mountains of Yugoslavia,<sup>1</sup> as Xavier Bourgarel also shows in a recent book on Tito's Partisans.<sup>2</sup>

The comparison with the French Resistance in mountain areas leads us to important insights, despite the different framework, context, temporalities and results. As specialists of the Resistance such as Jean Vigreux,<sup>3</sup>

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1 Project Description, "Heritage from Below, Drežnica: Traces and Memories 1941-1945", 1 June 2019, <https://www.ipu.hr/article/en/761/heritage-from-below-dreznica-traces-and-memories-1941-1945>. All webpages were last accessed on 16 April 2024.

2 Xavier Bourgarel, *Chez les partisans de Tito: communistes et paysans dans la Yougoslavie en guerre (1941-1945)* (Paris: Éditions Non-Lieu, 2023).

3 Jean Vigreux, "L'image du maquisard, un clandestin en forêt: histoire et mémoire", in *La forêt dans tous ses états de la Préhistoire à nos jours*, Actes du colloque de l'Association inter-universitaire de l'Est: Dijon (16-17 November 2001 sous la direction de Jean-Pierre Chabin, (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche Comté, 2005), 317-328.

François Marcot,<sup>4</sup> and Philippe Hanus have pointed out when evoking the “army of trees” in the Vercors,<sup>5</sup> mountains and forests were a major venue for resistance, particularly for young people in the 1940s. This was the experience of the *maquis*, marked by an ascetic life in the forest: a long period of waiting, learning the life of a man of the woods, experiencing the robinsonades that they had read about as children.<sup>6</sup> Not all the *maquisards* came from rural backgrounds: many knew nothing about the mountains. Workers, intellectuals and artists were forced to learn how to use an axe and chop wood for the necessities of daily life.

### Specific features of the Resistance in the French Alps

The specific case of the Alps is relevant for studying both the real and symbolic dimensions of the mountains in resistance, as René Jantzen has argued.<sup>7</sup> The Resistance in the Alps has been well-studied by historians, journalists and curators, by the protagonists themselves, and by novelists and film directors, albeit from different angles and in different geographical areas. This is where a question of scale appears: The French Alps are a mountainous area of resistance comparable to other mountainous areas in France (Cévennes, Pyrenees or Jura) and in Europe (Swiss, Italian, German and Austrian Alps, as well as the various Balkan territories), but there are specific features that make it unique among other mountain ranges.<sup>8</sup>

In comparison to other parts of the country, the French Alps did not see the emergence of significant resistance movements in the first period of the war. This changed due to two new developments in 1943. On the one hand, the Compulsory Work Service (*Service du Travail Obligatoire* – STO) was introduced by a law passed by the Vichy government on 16 February 1943, after many unsuccessful attempts at voluntary service that had resulted in only

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4 François Marcot, “La forêt sous l’occupation”, in *Les hommes et la forêt en Franche Comté*, eds. Pierre Gresser et al. (Paris: Bonneton, 1990).

5 Philippe Hanus, “‘L’ Armée des arbres’: la forêt dans les rêves et l’action des résistants du Vercors”, in *Vercors, Résistance en résonance*, eds. Philippe Hanus and Gilles Vergon (Paris: L’Harmattan-La mémoire des Alpes, 2008), 239.

6 In French, *maquis* means a place of dense vegetation. During World War II, it became synonymous with groups of resistance fighters hiding in the forest or mountains, simultaneously designating the location and the group.

7 René Jantzen, *Montagne et Symboles* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1988).

8 *Alpes Magazine*, hors-série 2014-2015, “Résistance et Libération dans les Alpes (1944-45)”.

70.000 people volunteering to work in Germany (far below the occupying forces' expectations).<sup>9</sup> This new situation created a massive movement of draft dodgers, called *réfractaires*, which affected different regions of France, and particularly the Alps. Because occupation and collaboration forces were less present there than in towns and villages, the mountains became a place of desertion and refuge, from what many young men saw as deportation.

On the other hand, and more specific to the area, the end of the Italian occupation, a few months later, also had an impact on the Alps. The Italian occupation zone included the entire massif up to the Rhône between November 1942 and early September 1943, when Mussolini was defeated and Italy capitulated. This short and unprecedented period gave this area, which included several regions and departments from Chamonix to Nice, including Isère, Vaucluse and the upper and lower Alps, its own timeframe and logic ahead of the brutal German takeover of the entire region, which led to immediate and large repression from September 1943.<sup>10</sup> Jews, communists and Resistance fighters in general were hunted down, rounded up and sometimes killed. It was in this context, as the war turned in favour of the Allies, that the French Alps became a strategic area during the planned landing of the Allies in France, playing a role in the Resistance that few had previously imagined.

## The mountain, a Vichy issue

For the first resisters in 1941 and 1942, the Alps did not appear as the ideal refuge. They were often too far away from objectives that remained primarily urban and were familiar only to a minority of the population. Until the 1940s, much of France's population had little experience with the mountain environment. Although mountaineering and skiing had been developed since the middle and end of the 19th century, evidenced by the foundation of the *Club Alpin Français* in 1874, they were still mostly an elite practice.<sup>11</sup> In the 1930s, the left-wing government of the Popular Front (*Front Populaire*) established holiday camps and youth hostels in the Alps. However,

9 Raphaël Spina, "La France et les Français devant le service du travail obligatoire (1942-1945)", (PhD diss., ENS Cachan, 2012), 1341; Raphaël Spina, *Histoire du STO* (Paris: Perrin, 2017), 570.

10 Jean-Louis Panicacci, *L'Occupation italienne du Sud-Est de la France (juin 1940-septembre 1943)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 440.

11 Olivier Hoibian, *Les Alpinistes en France (1870-1950). Une histoire culturelle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), 338.

“outdoor” activities still tended to take place in the countryside or by the sea. Activities in the mountains were promoted by the Vichy government, which came into being in July-August 1940, and its General Commissioner for Physical Education and Sports (*Commissariat Général à l'Éducation physique et sportive*). The latter was led by former tennis player Jean Borotra from 1940 to 1942) and then former rugby player Colonel Joseph Pascot between 1942 and 1944).<sup>12</sup> The Alps in particular stood out as an “exemplary site” in Pétain’s ideology and a founding area for a state of mind based on the compulsory youth camps with community service and physical activities for young men – *chantiers de jeunesse* – introduced by the new regime. Jean-Louis Gay-Lescot and Olivier Hoibian have studied the development of mountain leisure activities under Vichy,<sup>13</sup> as has Alice Travers, who argues that in the Vichy ideology of the National Revolution (*Révolution nationale*), the mountains took on a special meaning and became a major element of the regime’s propaganda, particularly aimed at young people.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, there is continuity between the Third Republic and Vichy on the subject of the mountains and the Alps in particular. During the Popular Front government, (1936-37) mountain sports and activities became popular, as the state invested in Alpine resorts to promote tourism. Vichy continued this, with a new element: Expressing regional patriotism through, for example, encouraging young inhabitants of the Alpine departments to get to know better the massifs from Chamonix to Nice.<sup>15</sup> In this way, we find topics discussed by the French nationalist writer Maurice Barrès in his 1913 book *La Colline inspirée* (The Sacred Hill), in which he celebrates mountains as a space of spiritual awakening.<sup>16</sup> According to Vichy ideology,

12 Jean-Louis Gay-Lescot, *Sport et Éducation sous Vichy (1940-1944)* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1991), 254.

13 Olivier Hoibian, “La jeunesse et la montagne sous Vichy”, in *Les loisirs de montagne sous Vichy. Droit, institutions et politique*, ed. Philippe Yolka (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2018), 125-149.

14 Alice Travers, *Politique et représentation de la montagne sous Vichy: la montagne éducatrice, 1940-1944* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), 284.

15 Sophie Cuénot, *Le Roman de Chamonix* (Paris: Paulsen, 2023); Jean-Paul Potron, “Victor de Cessole, l’inventeur des Alpes Maritimes”, Rencontres autour du patrimoine sportif et de la mémoire du sport (Musée National du Sport/Université Nice Sophia Antipolis, 2012-2015), [https://www.museedusport.fr/sites/default/files/Victor%20de%20Cessole%20inventeur%20des%20alpes%20maritimes\\_Jean%20Paul%20Potron.pdf](https://www.museedusport.fr/sites/default/files/Victor%20de%20Cessole%20inventeur%20des%20alpes%20maritimes_Jean%20Paul%20Potron.pdf).

16 Maurice Barrès, *La Colline Inspirée* (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, Éditeurs, 1913). The book was translated to English in 1929: Maurice Barrès, *The Sacred Hill*, trans Malcolm Cowley (New York: Macaulay, 1929).



Map 1: Southeast France. (Map designed by Iris Buljević for this publication.)

mountain sports should prepare the bodies of young Frenchmen, and this was a weapon against the decadence of France; the mountains were the absolute and positive opposite of the city and its excesses. The Alps forged good French character: Energy, self-control, decisiveness, courage, tenacity, discipline and solidarity.

In 1941, the Higher School of Skiing and Alpinism (*Ecole Supérieure de Ski et d'Alpinisme*), founded a few years earlier and directed by mountain guides Édouard Frenedo and Émile Allais, moved to Chamonix. Chamonix was a symbol of the Alps having been taken over by the Vichy authorities. In 1943, Louis Daquin's film *Premier de Cordée* (First of the Rope)

built on the success of Roger Frison-Roche's 1941 novel of the same name, which was exploited by Vichy mountain propaganda.<sup>17</sup> In 1943, when the Germans occupied Chamonix, Frison-Roche went into hiding in the Beaufortain massif in Savoie, becoming a liaison officer for the Resistance in the French Forces of the Interior (*Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* – FFI), an episode he would later explain in his novel *Les montagnards de la nuit* (The Night Mountaineers).<sup>18</sup> Another highly emblematic place, the École des Cadres at *Uriage-Les-Bains* near Grenoble, was set up in a mountain setting as a supervisor school for training future administrative executives, a new French elite under the command of Cavalry Captain Pierre Dunoyer de Ségonzac. Founded in September 1940, it was to have a short life. It closed in January 1943 because many of those involved turned their backs on Vichy and even joined the Resistance.<sup>19</sup>

### Alpine territories, from refuge to resistance

For most of the resisters, who were workers, employees and peasants from the plains, the mountains were unknown and rather worrying. Gilbert Garrier has studied the mountain dimension of the Resistance in the Rhône-Alpes region and has emphasised that the first *maquis* were not established in mountain but rather in plain areas, especially in Brittany. Indeed, in June 1944, there were still twice as many armed *maquis* in Brittany as in the Alps.<sup>20</sup> In the Rhône-Alpes region, the mountains had different levels. For the region's farmers, who came from Savoie, Dauphiné, Vaucluse, Gap, Digne and Nice, the mountains were familiar, humanised areas: Pastures, where they went up with their animals in summer and descended in autumn. Above them rose an inhospitable world of rock, snow and ice, where only a few guides, adventurers, hunters and crystal-cutters ventured.

17 Roger Frison-Roche, *Premier de cordée* (Paris: Arthaud, 1941), 318.

18 Roger Frison-Roche, *Les Montagnards de la nuit* (Paris: Arthaud, 1968), 416. The French Forces of the Interior (*Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* – FFI) were established in 1944 as the junction of the different internal resistance groups in France.

19 Bernard Comte, *Une utopie combattante: L'École des cadres d'Uriage (1940-1942)* (Paris, Fayard, 1991), 357; Antoine Delestre, *Uriage: une communauté et une école dans la tourmente 1940-1945* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1989), 333.

20 Gilbert Garrier, "Montagnes en résistance: réflexion sur des exemples en Rhône-Alpes", in *La Résistance et les Français*, eds. Jacqueline Sainclivier and Christian Bougeard (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1995), 207-220.

In fact, the sites favoured by the first *maquis* in the region belonged to the first mountain level, between 800 and 1.500 metres, between villages and mountain pastures; these were the so-called “utilitarian” mountains, the antechamber to an inhospitable “other world”. Thus, the Alps, as a place of refuge and hiding before being a place of resistance, were from the outset not an easy place.

How did the mountains transition from being a place of refuge to a place of resistance? A good example of the *maquis* that has been studied in France is that of the Cévennes as a land of refuge on less imposing massifs on the other side of the Rhône.<sup>21</sup> Throughout 1943, the Resistance general staff gradually institutionalised and militarised the *maquis* in the Alps, particularly in the Vercors. The *maquis* were joined by escapees from the *Chantiers de la jeunesse* and the *Groupements de travailleurs étrangers*, labour camps for groups of foreign workers, as well as Italian soldiers who had been routed in autumn 1943.

From then on, the aim was to turn *réfractaires* into fighters by structuring life in the highlands in camps that formed small units. There were tensions and regular friction in this process of moving from individual to collective action. With a view toward being ready for combat action, life in the camp was organised around raising the flag, learning how to handle weapons, “helping out” in villages in search of supplies, and intellectual and political training. The *maquisard* thus gradually became a clandestine fighter in the forest, capable of immediate guerrilla action: Ambushes, rapid attacks, immediate retreat under cover of vegetation.<sup>22</sup>

This development took place in the broader context of a unification of the Resistance under Jean Moulin’s leadership. The Unified Resistance Movements (*Mouvements Unifiés de la Résistance* – MUR) were created at the beginning of 1943. Although the coordination of movements in the southern zone and the merging of their military resources – under the name Secret Army (*Armée Secrète*) – came up against internal rivalries, after discussions, the main Resistance movements recognised the authority

21 Patrick Cabanel, Philippe Joutard and Jacques Poujol eds., *Cévennes terre de refuge (1940-44)* (Montpellier: Nouvelles Presses du Languedoc, 1987), 357. A land of *maquis* and armed resistance, the Cévennes were first and foremost a land of refuge, for example for persecuted Jews. In the mountains of the Gard and Lozère departments, several hundred persecuted people found a hospitable home, particularly among the Protestants, who were numerous in the region.

22 Philippe Hanus and Gilles Vergon eds., *Vercors, Résistances et résonances* (Paris: L’Harmattan-La mémoire des Alpes, 2008), 239.



of the Free French Forces (*Forces Françaises Libres* – FFL) led by General de Gaulle from his headquarters in Algiers. In 1943, 300 to 400 resisters from the Isère region joined mountain camps in the Alps. How many of these refugees would become volunteers for the guerrilla actions now prescribed for the *maquis* by the MUR headquarters? Until the spring of 1944, the main concern was ensuring the survival of the outcasts and their transformation into fighters.<sup>23</sup>

The specificity of the mountain environment is obvious. It can be considered from three points of view: Accommodation, equipment and supplies. For an individual or a very small group, huts could be enough. The best place to stay was with the locals, who could be farmers or lumberjacks by day and saboteurs or guerrillas by night. Living and surviving in the mountains required good individual equipment. All those who climbed required appropriate footwear. Food remained the big issue. The mountain environment alone could not provide good nourishment. In the mountains, the survival of the *maquis* also depended on the attitude of the population and local resources. Since local resources were more limited than elsewhere, it was necessary to compensate and multiply the sources of supply.

This incessant quest for survival sometimes required the entire groups' attention, as shown by the case of the Hautes-Alpes, which was the subject of a study by Jean-Pierre Pellegrin.<sup>24</sup> The case of Chamonix is also emblematic: Many STO *réfractaires* who were working on the Aiguille du Midi cable car at the time joined the Resistance by hiding in the mountains. The exemplary action of figures such as Abbé Payot, who was appointed to the parish of Vallorcine and set up a clandestine Resistance network in 1942, is particularly noteworthy. Payot hid refugees in the church tower and set up networks to help them cross the border into Switzerland. With the help of Vallorcins and mountain guides, he rescued Resistance members, Jews and *réfractaires*.<sup>25</sup> More generally, the MUR tried to bring these people together and provide them with military training. Despite a lack of resources and repression, the number of mountain *maquis* increased throughout 1943.

23 Suzanne Silvestre and Paul Silvestre, *Chronique des maquis de l'Isère* (Grenoble: Éditions des Quatre Seigneurs, 1978).

24 Jean-Pierre Pellegrin, "La Résistance FTP dans les Hautes-Alpes", in *Histoire des Francs-tireurs et partisans. Isère, Savoie, Hautes-Alpes*, eds. Olivier Cogne and Gil Emprin (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2017), 155-183.

25 Jean-Luc De Uffredi, *L'Abbé André Payot, résistant et chef de réseau (1939-45), Chamonix Mont-Blanc Vallorcine* (Lyon: Les passionnés de bouquins, 2019).

## Glières and Vercors: The tragic resistance in 1944

Two of those mountain *maquis* will go down in the history and legend of the Resistance. The first was set up in early 1943 by *réfractaires* on the Plateau des Glières near Annecy (Haute-Savoie) in a vast, relatively isolated mountain pasture 1.500 metres above sea level.<sup>26</sup> After validation by a Franco-British mission (led by the British lieutenant-colonel Heslop and the French captain Rosenthal), this area of large, fairly flat pastures far from the high peaks and easily spotted from the air thanks to its alignment with Annecy Lake, was chosen for a British aeroplane operation. The plan, scheduled for February 1944, was to drop weapons and other equipment by parachute there for all the *maquis* in the Alps. The plan also called for a British company of around a hundred men to parachute in.<sup>27</sup>

On the initiative of Resistance fighter and *maquis* organiser Henri Romans-Petit, between 31 January and 26 March 1944, 467 *maquisards* went up to the Plateau des Glières under the command of Lieutenant Tom Morel. They faced the cold and constant danger. It was a long wait and, despite the promises made by London, no help arrived, no parachute drops. Soon, the plateau was surrounded by Germans and Vichysts. On 9 March, Lieutenant Morel was killed by an officer from the *Groupes mobiles de réserve* (GMR), the paramilitary gendarmerie units created by Vichy. He was replaced by Captain Maurice Anjot. On 26 March 1944, after several days of fighting in a difficult environment (in which some people were injured or even killed in accidents), a Wehrmacht Alpine division comprised of almost 7.000 men, supported by aviation and artillery, and over 2.000 Vichy paramilitary forces, the GMR and *Milice*, launched an assault.<sup>28</sup> In the snow and cold, without heavy weapons, the *maquisards* resisted as much as they could, but were outnumbered and suffered heavy losses. Around 150 victims (including Captain Maurice Anjot), were shot by the Germans or the *Milice* or arrested and deported, and just as many were taken prisoner. Conversely,

26 Pierre Mouthon, *Haute-Savoie 1940-1945. Résistance, occupation, collaboration* (Épinal: éditions du Sapin d'Or, 1993).

27 Claude Barbier, *Le maquis de Glières. Mythe et réalité* (Paris: Perrin, 2014), 466; Robert Amoudruz and Jean-Claude Carrier, *Dimanche fatal aux Glières, 26 mars 1944* (Divonne-les-Bains: Éditions Cabédita, 2011); Pierre Vial, *Le sang des Glières* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1993).

28 The *Milice*, with full name *Milice française* (French Militia), was created by the Vichy regime in 1943 as a political paramilitary organisation especially to fight against the French Resistance.

there were less than ten German casualties, most of them because of accidents, and 13 dead on the Vichy side.<sup>29</sup>

The Vercors plateau near Grenoble, which reaches an altitude of more than 2.300 metres, has a different timeline, but a similar epilogue. Well studied by Gilles Vergnon, it also stands as a symbol of mountains as a space of resistance.<sup>30</sup> From the beginning of 1943, the Resistance organised itself on the massif. A dozen camps were set up deep in the forests. In 1942, Pierre Dalloz and the writer Jean Prévost had the idea of transforming the massif into a “fortress” or “citadel” for the Resistance, with the plan that the Vercors would become the site of an Allied landing that would bring the fight to the enemy’s rear.

The project, accepted in February 1943 by Resistance leader Jean Moulin and General Delestraint, commander of the *Armée Secrète*, became known as the Mountaineer’s Plan (*Plan Montagnard*) and was to serve as the basis for a substantial flow of troops by air. It was approved by General de Gaulle and the Allies in both London and Algiers. The idea was developed by Alain Le Ray and François Huet, the military leaders of the Vercors, along with Eugène Chavant, the civilian leader of the *maquis*. At the beginning of 1944, they brought together 400 to 500 civilians and soldiers who had “climbed” onto the plateau from various villages and towns in the region, often very young men, supplied by a generally supportive population and equipped with weapons and medicines from Allied parachute drops. On 6 June 1944, the day of the Allied landing in Normandy, the Vercors responded to the general mobilisation order issued by a message broadcast from *Radio Londres*. On 25 and 28 June, in Operation Zebra, over 180 Allied bombers made numerous parachute drops on the plateau to provide arms to the resisters.

On several occasions, unlike on the uninhabited Glières plateau, a large portion of the local population helped with equipment recovery operations, both day and night. The weapons were hidden in numerous natural cavities, particularly around Vassieux. The mood at the time, in the run-up to the Normandy landings, was optimistic, so much so that in early July 1944, the Republic of Vercors (*République du Vercors*) was proclaimed on the plateau, flying the tricolour flag over a territory declared “free”. For the first time since June 1940, France was back in control of an admittedly

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29 Michel Germain, *Glières, mars 1944 – “Vivre libre ou mourir!” – L'épopée héroïque et sublime* (Les Marches (Savoie): La Fontaine de Siloé, 1994).

30 Gilles Vergnon, *Le Vercors, histoire et mémoire d'un maquis* (Paris: l'Atelier, 2002).

limited and mountainous part of its territory, the Vercors plateau. But as the Normandy landings in June 1944 and the Provence landings in August 1944 occurred, the Alps were no longer a strategic priority for the Allies, and the hoped-for arrival of Allied troops in the Vercors Massif never took place. On the ground, the situation was quickly reversed.

From Grenoble and Saint-Nizier in the foothills of the massif, German troops aided by Vichy forces, intensified their repression. They were led by General Karl Pflaum, head of the 157th Reserve Division of the Wehrmacht, which was the same division that had acted on the Plateau des Glières. The *maquisards*, potential attackers, were besieged. The German operation, with Vichy help, mobilised almost 10.000 men, the largest operation against the Resistance in France. An airborne landing at Vassieux was organised in late July 1944 precisely along the lines of *Operation Rösselsprung*, which had been launched in Bosnia against Tito's Partisans at the end of May 1944. The offensive against the *maquis* was accompanied by atrocities against civilians and captured *maquisards*. More than 200 civilians were massacred or summarily executed, particularly in the villages of Vassieux and La Chapelle-en-Vercors. These acts of violence against civilians in France were rare compared with the Balkans, where the Germans massacred many more people. In all, over 639 *maquisards* and civilians were killed in July and August 1944 in the Vercors.<sup>31</sup>

### **Glières and Vercors: Emblematic sites of the Resistance myth**

Glières and Vercors are cases of territories being abandoned by the Allies at the same time as they suffered disaster and were transformed in the mythology of the Resistance. The negative balance sheet was transformed into a promotion of the values of heroism and the introduction of the extraordinary symbolic value of the Alpine Mountain environment, acquired and then preserved and even amplified over the years. Henri Romans-Petit called it "A defeat for arms but a victory for souls".<sup>32</sup> From 1944 onwards, the Glières plateau played a part in the myth of the Resistance that General De Gaulle in particular would come to defend, and that some, such as Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brillac, questioned from the 1970s onwards.<sup>33</sup> The

31 Ibid.

32 François Pernot, "Les Maquis de l'Ain", *Revue historique des Armées*, no. 195 (1994): 68-78.

33 Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brillac, "Les Glières", *Vingtième Siècle, revue d'histoire*, no. 45, (January-March 1995): 54-66.

Gaullist nationalist narrative suggested that the vast majority of French people had supported the Resistance, emphasising heroic deeds and epic tales that were partly, if not entirely, imaginary. The French *maquisards'* courage was an important piece of this discourse.

The elevation of the Glières into a symbol of resistance mythology began in September 1944 with a ceremony at the Morette cemetery, the necropolis of Les Glières (in the commune of Thône in Haute-Savoie). This was followed by the creation of the Association of Glières Survivors (*Association des rescapés des Glières*). On 4 November 1944, General de Gaulle himself visited the cemetery, which was officially inaugurated on 25 May 1947 by President Vincent Auriol.<sup>34</sup> A central square in Algiers was named after the Glières plateau and in 1966, a secondary school named “Glières” was built in Annemasse. This helped perpetuate the myth at a local level, as did André Malraux’s speech on the plateau at the inauguration of the spectacular monument designed by Émile Gilioli in September 1973. Today, every hiker who visits the plateau can see that monument.

In the frame of the “Wer ist Walter?” research project, which refers to the *nom de guerre* of the communist Vladimir Perić in Sarajevo and which gave birth to the present publication, it might also be noted that a “Walter network” existed in the Alps during World War II. It is linked to the resistant Walter Bassan, who was born in Italy in 1926 and whose anti-fascist family then lived in exile in Haute-Savoie near Les Glières. At the age of 17, this young communist resistance fighter formed a group called the “Walter Group” in the Alps and in Lyon. Most in the group were arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Dachau. Walter Bassan survived Dachau and later became a member of the Resistant Citizens of Yesterday and Today (*Citoyens Résistants d’Hier et d’Aujourd’hui* – CRHA) association, through which he continued to talk about his Resistance experience until his death in 2017. He also participated actively in CRHA’s annual gatherings from 2007 onwards on the Glières plateau in order to protest the politics of newly elected right-wing French President Nicolas Sarkozy. In 2009, director Gilles Perret made a film about him, *Walter, retour en résistance* (Walter, return to resistance), part of which was shot on the Glières plateau.<sup>35</sup>

34 Claude Barbier, *Le maquis des Glières, mars 1944, mythe et réalités* (Paris: Perrin, 2013), 480.

35 Claire Rösler, *Walter, une vie de résistances* (Magland: Neva Éditions, 2012). The documentary film of Gilles Perret: *Walter, retour en résistance* (Paris: La Vaka Production, 2009).

Vercors – apart being the surname of the famous writer Jean Bruller, author of the novel *Le Silence de la mer* (The Silence of the Sea),<sup>36</sup> who chose the name in 1941 with no idea of the massif's resistance destiny – has become a veritable sanctuary for memory of the Resistance, particularly through the cultural activities developed by the Vercors Regional Park since its creation in 1970.<sup>37</sup> It combines the beauty of the landscape with numerous memory sites linked to the events of 1944, among them a museum in Vassieux, created in 1973 by a resister, Joseph La Picirella, a memorial set into the mountain and opened in 1994, and a necropolis built in 1948 in Vassieux with the graves of 187 *maquisards* and civilians, near the remains of a German plane.<sup>38</sup>

Other important sites include the necropolis at Saint-Nizier, with the graves of 100 more *maquisards*, and the ruins of the village of Valchevrière which, in the middle of the forest, served as a camp for the *maquisards* before becoming the scene of heavy fighting and the heroic actions of a group of Resistance fighters under the command of Lieutenant Chabal. There is also the *Cour des fusillés* (Court of the Shot Dead) at La Chapelle-en-Vercors, a courtyard where 16 young people were executed, and the Grotte de la Luire, a cave that served as a hospital on the plateau and was surrounded by the Germans on 27 July 1944, resulting in the execution of several people, including doctors and the chaplain.<sup>39</sup> Among different publications, the book edited by Philippe Hanus and Laure Teulières and published in 2013 explores foreigners' important roles in the Vercors Resistance.<sup>40</sup> As for the Glières plateau, since the 1990s, researchers and local associations have opened new perspectives and approaches towards the life and resistance in the Vercors, which go beyond the official heroic narrative.<sup>41</sup> One example is

36 The novel *Silence de la mer* was published secretly in German-occupied Paris in 1942 and became a symbol of spiritual resistance against German occupation.

37 Hanus and Vergon, *Vercors, Résistances et résonances*, 239.

38 See the website of the Parc National du Vercors: [https://www.parc-du-vercors.fr/sites/default/files/inline-images/resistance/Pdf/166062\\_MEMORIAL%20RESISTANCE\\_DEP%20Lieux-Me%E2%95%A0%C3%BCmoire\\_BAT.pdf](https://www.parc-du-vercors.fr/sites/default/files/inline-images/resistance/Pdf/166062_MEMORIAL%20RESISTANCE_DEP%20Lieux-Me%E2%95%A0%C3%BCmoire_BAT.pdf)

39 Cf. on the website: "Cartes des principaux lieux de mémoire dans la drôme *Musée de la résistance 1940-1945 en ligne*: <https://museedelaresistanceenligne.org/media1380-Cartes-des-principaux-lieux-de-mmoire-dans-la-Drme>.

40 Philippe Hanus and Laure Teulières Laure eds., *Vercors des mille chemins. Figures de l'étranger en temps de guerre* (Rochechinard: Comptoir d'éditions, 2013), 319.

41 Marie-Thérèse Têtu-Delage, "Un tournant mémoriel sur le Vercors entre blocage et ressources", *Journée Mémoires de la Résistance et de la guerre: redéploiements en région Rhône-Alpes*, eds. Alain Battégay and Marie-Thérèse Têtu-Delage (Lyon: Centre d'histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation, 2007), <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00727412>; Marie-Thérèse Têtu, "Vercors et Résistance, sous le mythe les mémoires", in *Vercors, Résistance en résonance*, eds. Philippe Hanus and Gilles Vergon (Paris: L'Harmattan-La mémoire des Alpes, 2008), 173-190.

the Mémorha Network, which was established in 2011 and gathers different organisations, researchers and remembrance sites linked to World War II in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region.<sup>42</sup>

The Glières and the Vercors are now internationally renowned sites, giving them a special role regarding the history and memory of the Resistance.

## **Further south, another resistance in the mountains of the Alpes-Maritimes**

Major Marcel Pourchier was one of the pioneers of the Vercors *maquis*. His friend, Pierre Dalloz, had asked him to set up the *Plan Montagnard*. Pourchier was born in 1897 in the hinterland of Nice, in Beuil, a village at an altitude of 1.500 metres. He became a soldier of the Alpine Hunters (*Chasseurs alpins*) and in 1932, the first commander of the new French mountain warfare school (*École de haute montagne* – EHM) in Chamonix. During World War II, he returned to his village and joined the Resistance. He was arrested by the Gestapo in January 1944, transferred to the Struthof concentration camp and liquidated there in September 1944.<sup>43</sup>

Marcel Pourchier was from the southern Alps, an area that saw its share of troubles and resistance. Nice and its hinterland became a veritable land of refuge, not so much for STO *réfractaires* as for Jews during the period of Italian occupation between November 1942 and September 1943. Several thousand Jews came there, taking advantage of the lack of Italian repression against them. But the situation changed radically after Italy signed an armistice in September 1943. With the German occupation, Nazi violence descended on Nice, its region and hinterland. The Gestapo, based at the Excelsior Hotel near the main train station and led by Alois Brunner (who until then had commanded the Drancy internment camp in the North of Paris), deployed all possible means for persecution and repression.<sup>44</sup>

Although resistance in Nice grew over the war years, the early times were difficult. The most important action happened on 28 August 1944, when armed resisters from the FFI, most of whom were communists,

42 “Memorha network”, hypotheses, <https://memorha.hypotheses.org/>.

43 Jean-Pierre Martin, “Jusqu’au bout du devoir, le lieutenant-colonel Marcel Pourchier”, *Les Cahiers des troupes de montagne*, no. 17 (summer 1999): 30-38.

44 Jean-Louis Panicacci, *Les Alpes-Maritimes de 1939 à 1945. Un département dans la tourmente* (Nice: Éditions Serre, 1996).

assisted by civilians and other resistance fighters from villages in the hinterland, liberated the city before the Allies, who were liberating the entire coast, arrived on the following day. The 30 casualties of this day on the Resistance side have been commemorated for several decades in an original scheme called The Memory Circuit (*Le circuit de la mémoire*), which offers a commemorative tour of the plaques honouring each of the victims in the places where they fell on 28 August of every year.<sup>45</sup>

There were also fights in the mountains of the Alpes-Maritimes. The battle of Authion, at an altitude of over 2.000 metres in April 1945, is particularly noteworthy. In this, one of the last battles, the Germans were pushed out of the area.<sup>46</sup> This hinterland of Nice was the base for another form of resistance, in which a large part of the local population supported endangered persons and groups, especially in the Vésubie valley. Between April and September 1943, several thousand foreign Jews had officially been placed under house arrest by the Italian authorities in Saint-Martin Vésubie and surrounding villages such as Venanson, Belvédère, La Bollène-Vésubie and Roquebillière. The Italian authorities showed a lot of indulgence, and the Jewish refugees spent a paradoxically quiet summer of 1943 in these villages, as recounted in a radio documentary by Raphaël Krafft and Véronique Samouiloff in 2016.<sup>47</sup> This is also the topic of Jean-Marie Le Clézio's 1992 novel *L'Étoile errante* (Wandering Star). In the shade of the plane trees in the village square, on the café terraces, people talked about everything, freely and in all languages: Polish, German, Czech, Russian, even Yiddish. Groups of teenagers bathed in the river where their first flirtations and loves were born in the surrounding fields and woods. Food was scarce and expensive, but people danced the night away. In mid-1943, Saint-Martin-Vésubie was a haven of peace, an unimaginable refuge in Europe.

The situation changed with the Italian armistice and the foreseen arrival of the German army. Transalpine officers urged the Jews to follow them to Piémont to escape German repression. Without waiting, around a thousand of them took the steep routes over the passes of Cerise, Fenestre

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45 Cf. Michel Goury, *La liste. 28 août 1944* (Nice, 2019), <https://www.fichier-pdf.fr/2019/08/25/circuit-memoire-la-liste-par-michel-goury/>.

46 Pierre-Emmanuel Klingbeil, *Le front oublié des Alpes-Maritimes (15 août 1944-2 mai 1945)* (Nice: Éditions Serre, 2005).

47 "1943 Saint Martin Vésubie, l'histoire d'un millier de juifs", *Radio France*, 6 September 2016: <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-fabrique-de-l-histoire/1943-saint-martin-vesubie-l-histoire-d-un-millier-de-juifs-3865280>.



and Boréon, at heights of over 2.500 metres, towards the Piedmont villages of Valdieri and Entracque, where they were well received. Others decided to wait and stay in the Vésubie. The manhunt began in September. The commander of the police of Saint-Martin-Vésubie, *maréchal des logis* Landry Mangon and his wife Adrienne Mangon, hid Jean-Claude Dreyermann, a fifteen-month-old infant; another gendarme in the brigade, Joseph Fougère and his wife Yvonne, hid his older sister Cécile, aged five, passing her off as their own daughter. The two children remained hidden in the gendarmerie for several months; their mother, eight months pregnant, was able to escape with her family from the roundup organised on 8 September 1943. The two gendarmes and their wives were posthumously awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations (*Juste parmi les Nations*) by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel, at a ceremony in Saint-Martin-Vésubie in September 2010. Other Jews, helped by local farmers, tried to cross the border through the mountains in haste. But many – between 800 and 1.000 – were arrested and interned at the Borgo San Dalmazzo barracks, which had become a mountain concentration camp close to the Italian side of the border, until 21 November, when they were deported via Savona and Nice to Drancy and then Auschwitz. Only 12 escaped extermination. On 25 September 2016, the commune of Saint-Martin Vésubie was officially recognised as a member of the network Righteous Towns and Villages of France (*Villes et Villages Justes de France*). The village thus enjoyed a late but real notoriety putting forward its “spirit of resistance”. This is also reflected in cultural productions such as the successful film *Belle et Sébastien*, directed in 2013 by Nicolas Vanier, which had 3 million viewers in cinemas during its run. The film was based on a serial by Cécile Aubry broadcast on French television in 1965. Appreciated by children and families, the story is about the friendship and affection of Sébastien, a young, slightly rebellious village boy with an uncertain identity, with a mountain dog chased by hunters who he names Belle (beautiful). The story is set in 1943 and takes place in Saint-Martin Vésubie (“Saint Martin” in the film). While the 1965 TV series focused on mountain life and made no reference to historical events, the omnipresent backdrop of the 2013 film is the villagers’ resistance against the Nazis, notably serving as smugglers for Jews fleeing repression, heading to Italy.

## Conclusion

For the young men, and more rarely women, involved in the armed fight against barbarism, following the example of the *maquis* in the Alps in 1943-44, the mountains became a place that was viewed differently. They were a place for physical exercise, for the exaltation of camaraderie and for surpassing oneself. Counteracting the Vichy ideological issue, it was the Resistance's investment in the Alps that made the mountains an imaginary world linked to the rebellious spirit, courage and fraternal values. The Youth and Mountains (*Jeunesse et montagne*) association created in 1940 by Vichy and gradually taken over by the Resistance, bears witness to this. In 1965 it became the Union of Outdoor Sports Centres (*Union des centres sportifs de plein air* – UCPA), which organises and promotes leisure activities for young people and families. The mountains were particularly well liked by the communists in the decades after the war, as evidenced by the 1967 song “La Montagne” by the popular communist singer Jean Ferrat.

The Alps played a key role in the French Resistance during World War II, with day-to-day resistance and mythical heroism, the armed mobilisation of the younger generation and the generally benevolent attitude of the civilian population in villages. Confronted with the beauty of the landscapes, the mystery of the forests, the exhilaration of the heights and the material difficulties, the *maquisards* experienced, at the constant risk of losing their lives, the exaltation of great plans that were ultimately abandoned or even betrayed. This generation of young people spent those long months fighting for an ideal, the ideal of their youth. Left to their own devices, they fought by their own means for an objective that became blurred in a theatre that had become a trap that closed in on itself. Those who died were honoured just as much as the survivors. The failures of which they were the victims have been transformed into a narrative shared internationally because it is so universal. That narrative is about the heroism of people of little means, whose commitment is considered noble because it was spontaneous and not formally structured on a military or ideological level.

Unlike the case of the Yugoslav mountains, where Tito and his Partisans were able to triumph over the enemy, the French case was one of failure, but one that the Resistance movement incorporated into the more global triumph of the Allies who liberated France starting in summer 1944. What remains are the common values of fraternity and courage in commitment shared by resistants from the mountains of Yugoslavia and France, values that are still important to pass on today.

# 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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