

Frederic Raphael

Revenge of the Second-Rate

The Shameful Peace: How French Artists and Intellectuals Survived the Nazi Occupation
By *Frederic Spotts* (Yale University Press 288pp £25)

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Frederic Spotts begins his account of the conduct of French artists during the Occupation with the suggestion that it is a neglected subject. He complains that Robert Aron's 1954 *Histoire de Vichy* 'devoted at most three hundred words to cultural matters' and that, nearly forty years later, *Le Régime de Vichy*, a 788-page series of papers by seventy-two scholars (the same number responsible for the original *Septuagint*), contained 'nary a word' about artistic life or cultural figures. I suspect that the reason for these alleged omissions was more to do with the French disapproval of historians who stray hors sujet than with any large lack of books on Céline, Sartre and de Beauvoir, Drieu la Rochelle, Gide, Montherlant, Brasillach and everyone else who was anybody during the *années noires* between 1940 and 1944. In cultural terms, Vichy was only Vichy, while Paris was still, almost, Paris.

In the capital, Germany attempted to supplant French culture in what had been the mecca of European arts. German music and musicians supplied the sound track. The seduction of as many intellectuals as possible, by flattery, preference and treats, was part of the orchestrated degradation of a defeated and disheartened enemy. The good fortune of the occupiers and the shame of the French lay in there being no lack of local candidates for social, editorial and showbiz advancement, in the place of those who were anathema alike to the conquerors and to their lackeys. It was a sumptuous opportunity for the revenge of the second-rate.

Hitler's success appeared so crushing that it required the possession of moral fibre amounting almost to perversity to choose the path taken by, for eminent instance, Jean Guéhenno, who decided not only not to publish while the Germans were in Paris but also never to acknowledge their presence by so much as looking at them. There were, of course, those who had no choice in their *prise de position*: Jews, Freemasons, Communists (after 1941, when the party line switched), and renowned anti-fascists, including refugee Spaniards, could only hide, run or - as many did - rally to the Resistance, of which they frequently formed the earliest and most active elements.

After the Liberation, Jean-Paul Sartre declared, in disingenuous apology, 'Everything we did was equivocal. We never quite knew whether what we were doing was right or wrong. A subtle poison corroded even our best intentions.' Speak for yourself, Poulou. Men such as the novelist Vercors (Jean Bruller), the satirist Galtier-Boissière and Albert Camus appear, like Guéhenno, not to have equivocated at all. If he did not take the *collabo* road, along which Cocteau, Fabre-Luce, Rebatet and, in his erratic fashion, Céline were prompt to crawl, Sartre certainly solicited the German censors' approval of the plays which entertained the collaborationist *gratin* on the eve of the Normandy landings in 1944.

It is said here that he and Simone de Beauvoir cycled around France trying to start a resistance movement, but they took care to call only on career-advancing A-listers such as Gide and Malraux, who advised them to wait for the Americans to pull France's chestnuts out of the fire. Spotts doesn't mention that, when the Yanks did finally come, Malraux promoted himself to a colonelcy and contrived to be an instant Resistance hero. Meanwhile, Sartre and Le Castor had been to the movies in Marseille to see Edward G Robinson, before becoming the bravest couple in the *Café de Flore*. Once France had its chestnuts back, America became the one-size-fits-all Satan not only of disappointed *collabos* but also of the frustrated *extrême Gauche* (including Poulou and Le Castor) and of General de Gaulle and his chums.

Jean Cocteau is quoted, on an early page, referring to the 'shameful peace', but only much later is his remark put in the context of a toast, proposed in a smart *café*, soon after the capitulation: 'Vive cette paix honteuse!' Sartre claimed that 'a mixture of masochism and homosexuality' was no unusual recipe for a collaborator. Henry de Montherlant, prig and poseur, said that because the French were weak and decadent, they had to submit to virile German soldiers 'streaming with sweat'. In the same camp, Robert Brasillach was already hot to trot with Hitler, whose Reich he visited, along with other trimmers and toadies, and whose anti-Semitism became his missionary faith.

After Brasillach was sentenced to death, in 1945, François Mauriac (the French Lord Longford) petitioned General de Gaulle for a reprieve, not least on account of Brasillach's talent. De Gaulle refused, at least in part because of it. This leads Spotts to comment that Brasillach was punished 'more for who he was than for what he had done'. Since his newspaper, *Je Suis Partout*, published the names and addresses of those (particularly Jews) who were in hiding, it is hard to accept that his execution was merely *pour encourager les autres*. Spotts implies that it raises the question 'to what extent should artists and intellectuals be held politically responsible for their actions?' Does the adverb do any significant work here? I cannot see that soliciting murder, and being an accessory before, during and after the act, is ever a matter of politics and therefore exempt from sanction. But then I know people who waited for that knock at the door.

A great deal of useful and interesting material is assembled, or reassembled here. What is missing

is any recognition that the division of France, literal and metaphorical, after 1940, was not merely into goodies and baddies. As Robert Gildea's *Marianne in Chains* and his recent, clunking *Children of the Revolution* illustrate, it was the continuation of a cleavage that went back at least to the Revolution and would persist in the post-war stand-off between Left and Right. Spotts doesn't mention that Malraux, as de Gaulle's Minister of Cultural Affairs, threatened Gaston Gallimard, in the 1960s, with reopening the charge of collaboration against his publishing house unless he ceased to subsidise Sartre and de Beauvoir's left-wing magazine, *Les Temps Modernes*. Gallimard did not resist.

André Gide had been similarly menaced with denunciation by the loathsome Louis Aragon, the real motive being Gide's pre-war book, *Retour de l'URSS*, exposing Soviet tyranny, not his wartime quiescence. Picasso, who produced almost 1,500 works of various kinds while the world was at war, took prompt insurance when it ended, by joining the Communist Party, thus dodging Aragon's accusing finger. Doves also suck.

The internecine hatreds of the French, and their vindictiveness towards ideological or social enemies, had no parallel in other conquered Western countries. Men such as Charles Maurras, stone deaf to all voices but his own, had long advocated violence (he incited the near-murder of Léon Blum in 1936) and venomous anti-Semitism, though his list of hates included the Germans. When condemned to life imprisonment (he was reprieved) after the Liberation, he cried out 'C'est la revanche de Dreyfus!' Implacable crack-pottery has long been an aspect, and an export, of the allegedly most intelligent people on earth: Pol Pot and Chou En-Lai both studied in Paris.

Thanks to the English Channel and Churchill's shaming of the appeasers and Peace-Pledgers, the British never discovered which of them would have collaborated. How certain is it that English intellectuals and artists would have been more morally fibrous than those in France? After all, there was no shortage of British fellow travellers with Stalin and his heirs when they looked like winners. How proudly, and how recently, artistic delegations paraded, in their fur hats, before setting off for caviar and humbug in Moscow! *Mutatis mutandis*, would they have boycotted a victorious Berlin? Would le tout Londres have been any shorter of aristocratic hostesses, under Tom Mosley's gauleitership, than Paris was with its three noble Maries? Would Lord Rothermere have refused to publish the *Daily Mail* with a swastika in its top right-hand corner? Who would put money on G B Shaw (who admired Hitler and Mussolini, and favoured state-directed 'eugenics') shaving his beard, dumping his waggishness and taking to the hills? Who can be sure that Edward VIII would have refused a majestic role for Wallis or that Hitler's admirer Lloyd George would have turned down the Pétain part? Where would T S Eliot have stood, or wavered, when offered a poetic commissarship? As for *The New Statesman's* Kingsley Martin and his like, the term 'intellectual', W H Auden famously remarked, smacks of 'someone who is untrue to his wife'; and to anything else, very often, which stands between him and the limelight.