

Diary Entries on the Nazi Terror in France (1941)

Abstract

After France was invaded by Germany in June 1940, German forces set about securing their rule in the occupied territory. While the southern region of the country was handed over to Marshall Philippe Pétain's Vichy regime, the northern half of France remained under direct and de facto Nazi rule. In 1941, the Reich Security Main Office [*Reichssicherheitshauptamt* or RSHA] in charge of occupied France established a French auxiliary secret police force, known as the Carlingue. Named after the cabin section of an aircraft, the Carlingue was also commonly known as the Bonny-Lafont Gang, after Pierre Bonny and Henri Lafont, two of the principal French founders of the organization. Composed primarily of former soldiers from North African brigades, the group also included many members of France's criminal underworld, such as gangsters, informants, and spies.

Reporting directly to the RSHA, the Carlingue effectively acted as a French Gestapo, supporting Nazi rule by enforcing the Reich's laws, as well as targeting Communists, anarchists, and Jews in France. These 1941 excerpts from the diary of Jean Guéhenno (1890–1978), a French essayist, writer, and literary critic, offer an account of early infringements on traditional French civil liberties and describe a direct pogrom against so-called enemies of the Nazi police state. Guéhenno recounts his fear and disbelief at the events taking place around him, referring to them collectively as a “reign of terror,” a direct reference to the chaotic period of the French Revolution from June 1793 to July 1794, which saw the death of over 15,000 people. The tone of Guéhenno's entries conveys the depression, anger, and fear he and others felt during the occupation, as well as a sense of hopelessness—for himself, for the workers, and for France as a whole.

Source

[...]

May 15 [1941]

Yesterday, in the name of the laws of France, 5,000 Jews were taken away to concentration camps. Poor Jews from Poland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, humble people with modest trades who were greatly endangering the state. They call this “purification.” On Rue Compans several men were taken away. Their wives and children begged the police, shouted, wept... The working people of Paris who saw these heartrending scenes were full of indignation and shame.

[...]

August 21 [1941]

The air is getting heavier and heavier, unbreathable. In some neighborhoods the police are closing off the streets. A whole arrondissement (the 11th) has been searched. Jews have been arrested, Communists shot. Every morning, new posters invite us to become informers and threaten us with death. The worried “occupier” is organizing a reign of terror. In this “communard” neighborhood where I live, between Rue Haxo and Rue des Rosiers, the poor working people, who have been resigned for a long time, are falling into despair. There is nothing to eat. For the past two weeks, all meat has been confiscated. The news from Russia is bad. The workers feel that their dream is collapsing. They walk around with closed faces. The moment is approaching when no one will have anything left to care about and the flame of revolution will flare up. We can feel ourselves slipping into something unknown and frightful. We are stifling. From the bottom of my heart, I wish the poor people in whose midst I live courage and patience.

There is nothing we can do now, and there will be nothing we can do for a long time to come.

Forget about “I think, therefore I am”: people conclude “I am, therefore I think.” What pretension!

[...]

October 5 [1941]

I’ve given up keeping a record of the stupidity and vileness of the times in this “diary.” The day before yesterday bombs exploded in all the synagogues of Paris...They’re announcing a few new executions by firing squad... All civil servants (and I am one) will have to swear an oath to the Marshal, etc. Let us wait, with resignation.

Luckily tomorrow I’ll see my students once again.

[...]

October 12 [1941]

I find it prudent to put these “notebooks” in a safe place. From now on I will keep this diary on separate sheets of paper. The news from Russia is bad. Once the Germans take Moscow, will the same political decomposition that occurred last year in France take place in Russia? If the Soviets survive, if they don’t sign an armistice, if the war continues in one way or another (a war analogous to the one the Chinese have been waging for seven years), perhaps nothing is lost.

The new prefect of police—an admiral, of course—boasts of having arrested 1,100 Communists or Anglophiles.

Langevin, who was under house arrest, has been jailed again. Borel (sixty-six years old) has also been arrested. The Gestapo has declared all of academia under suspicion.

The Germans’ repressive methods are such that there is not one Frenchman who will not feel his debt to the Jews and the Communists, jailed and shot for us. They are the veritable sacrificial victims of the people.

[...]

December 16 [1941]

(Still sick. Dizzy. Sweats. Extreme weakness. Nervous impatience.)

The curfew has been brought back to midnight, but General von Stülpnagel is announcing new reprisals: “A fine of a billion francs on the Jews. Deportation of Jews and Communists to Germany, execution of a hundred Jews, Communists, and anarchists.” Neither Jews nor Communists, he explains, are French, and X... comments in *Aujourd’hui*: “However severe the news may be, it was welcomed with relief by public opinion because it allows for innocence.” Now there’s something we should remember.

How long will this last? A year, two years, ten years perhaps. We’ll have to find a way to live through this horror, to settle into it, to wait. But how? We’re in blood up to our bellies and all around us. How can we not see it?

Source of English translation: Jean Guéhenno, *Diary of the Dark Years, 1940–1944. Collaboration, Resistance, and Daily Life in Occupied Paris*. Translated and annotated by David Ball. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 83, 108–09, 117, 119, 135–36. © Oxford University Press. Republished with

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