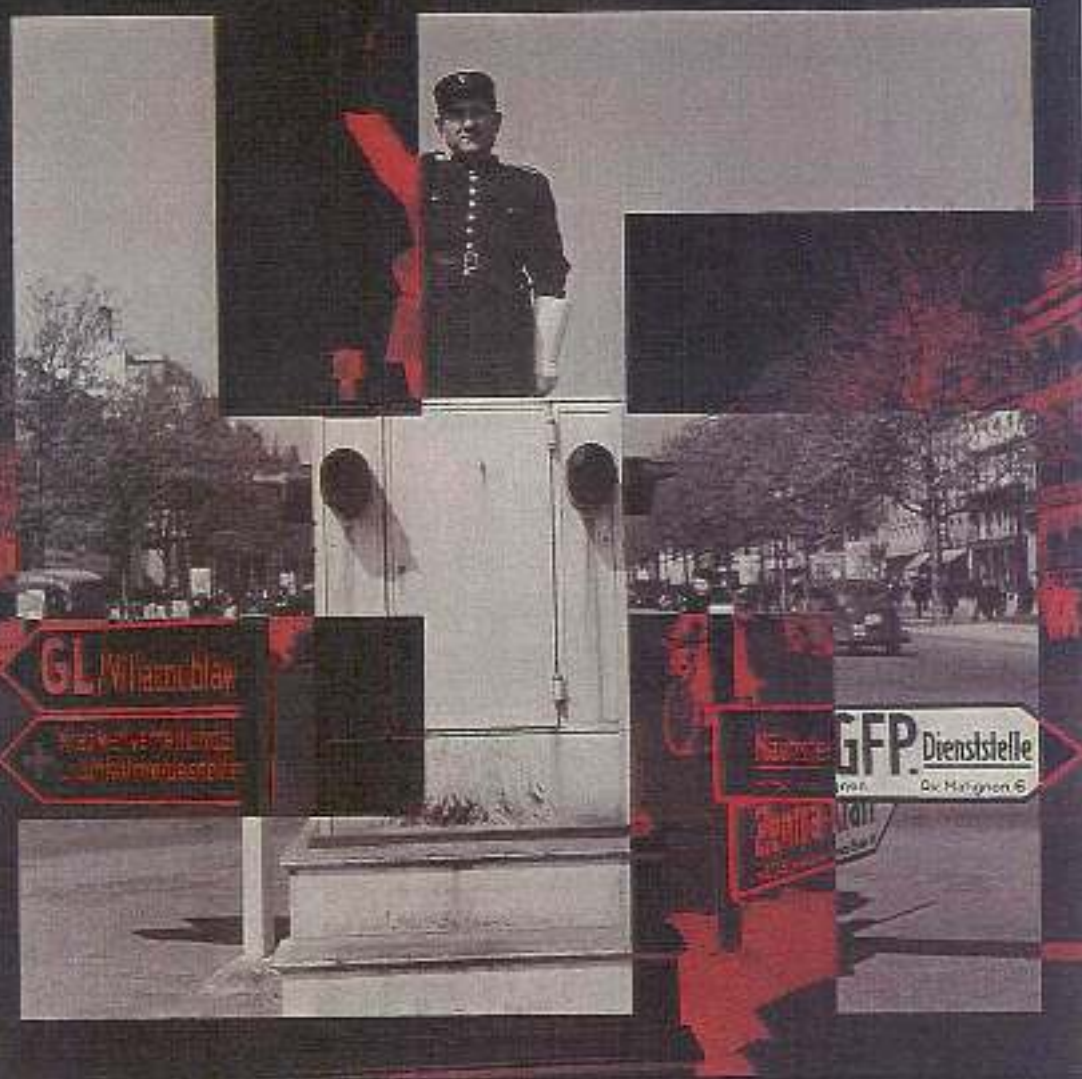


I A N O U S B Y



# OCCUPATION

THE ORDEAL OF FRANCE 1940-1944

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Praise for *Occupation*

“[A] perceptive historical study [that] dismantles the lingering Gaullist myth of a unified, heroic French resistance movement.”  
—*Publishers Weekly*

“[A] compelling account of those bleak years of Occupation. Ousby does not mince his words. His book is a valuable distillation culled from a vast amount of literature on the subject, and it provides a wealth of intriguing detail about daily life and contemporary attitudes.”—*The Independent*

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# *Occupation*

The Ordeal of France, 1940–1944

IAN OUSBY

 Cooper Square Press

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First Cooper Square Press edition 2000

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I will never believe that people are made for war. But I also know that they are not made for servitude either.

Jean Guéhenno, 17 June 1940



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## *Preface*

I AM ENGLISH. I was born in 1947. I have no formal training as a historian. In other words, I lack all the obvious qualifications for writing about the German occupation of France during the Second World War – a subject jealously guarded first by a generation of writers (usually French) who had lived through the experience and then by a generation of academic historians (not always French) who have built up a complex body of scholarship, still enlarging by the minute. So, to start with, I owe the reader at least a word of explanation about how I came to write this book and what function I intend it to serve.

The second, and more important, matter is simple to explain. My aim has been to write a short history of the Occupation in its various aspects – social and cultural, as well as political and military – for the general reader rather than the specialist. The fact that such a book does not already exist (at least not in English) is no rebuke to the academics who have in recent years done so much to shed new light on the period. Indeed, it is precisely in such times of re-evaluation, when established views are challenged and new ones breed controversy, that general readers tend to get neglected.

I myself certainly began by feeling the consequences of this neglect during my time in France over the last decade. Like so many visitors, I was struck by the imprint that the Occupation, though it is now a good fifty years in the past, has left on contemporary France. It is there most obviously in a habit of official commemoration. Towns name their central squares after the exact day when they were liberated in 1944, or after the day shortly beforehand when local people were massacred. The generals commanding the French divisions in the Allied armies

give their names to main streets: the Rue Général Leclerc in the north, the Avenue de Lattre de Tassigny in the south. *Résistants* are remembered everywhere, though on plaques and monuments put up by their surviving comrades rather than on the civic war memorials listing those who died in 1914–18 or during the fall of France in 1940. On the wall of a house in a back street, or beside a busy road, or in the overgrown depths of a wood, one comes across the reminder that this particular *résistant* or this particular group of *résistants* died on this particular spot. The inscriptions often speak in uncompromising terms of cowardly betrayals and barbarous atrocities, and the monuments themselves are always immaculately tended.

To the visitor from England such reminders – local, fragmentary, only partly understood though they may be – bring home the force of the question Jean-Paul Sartre first asked when the events themselves were barely over: ‘How can the people of the free countries be made to realize what life was like under the Occupation?’ His implied answer, obviously, was that they could not: that *we* could not. And he was undoubtedly right. Even with the greatest imagination, the most careful reconstruction, the most detailed scholarship, the gap between the French experience and the British experience in the Second World War remains unbridgeable. Yet, of course, this is not to say that the effort is worthless. It is perhaps now more tantalizing than ever to make it, and more instructive too.

For the British, consideration of what it meant for France to be occupied has always involved covert self-questioning. If we had been occupied too, what would have happened to us? How would we have behaved? Always uneasy, these questions are now tinged with a sort of speculative guilt prompted by the stock which the French themselves have been taking of their own record. Sartre characterized the different memories separating Britain and France by saying that ‘a past which fills London with pride was, for Paris, marked with shame and despair’. This put the matter with a bluntness that was unwelcome so soon after the events. In general the French, understandably, reacted to their ordeal by retreating into a myth (my epilogue shows how it can fairly be called the Gaullist myth) of a people united in hostility to the Nazi occupiers, of a nation of *résistants*. For our part, we in Britain were content to accept the myth – though of course we insisted, in the films and popular literature which flourished in my childhood, on giving British agents a flatteringly prominent role, usually the leading role, in resistance.

Even from the start, however, the myth could not completely stifle the sense of shame and despair to which Sartre testified. Alongside the official commemorations, an act of collective forgetting was also required. It was written quite literally into the title of André Mornet's book published in 1949, *Quatre années à rayer de notre histoire* (*Four Years to Strike from Our History*). What had to be forgotten was not France's defeat in 1940 or the brutality of her occupiers, of course. What had to be forgotten was what the French had done to the French. So when, in July 1946, an official monument was unveiled on the spot where the politician Georges Mandel had been killed in the forest of Fontainebleau two years before, its inscription spoke of him as having been 'murdered by the enemies of France' – the bland phrase deliberately failing to specify that his murderers were Frenchmen. And when, a decade later, Alain Resnais made his documentary film about Auschwitz, *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*), the censors objected to footage which showed that the Jews deported from the camp at Pithiviers were herded into the trains not by German soldiers but by French gendarmes.

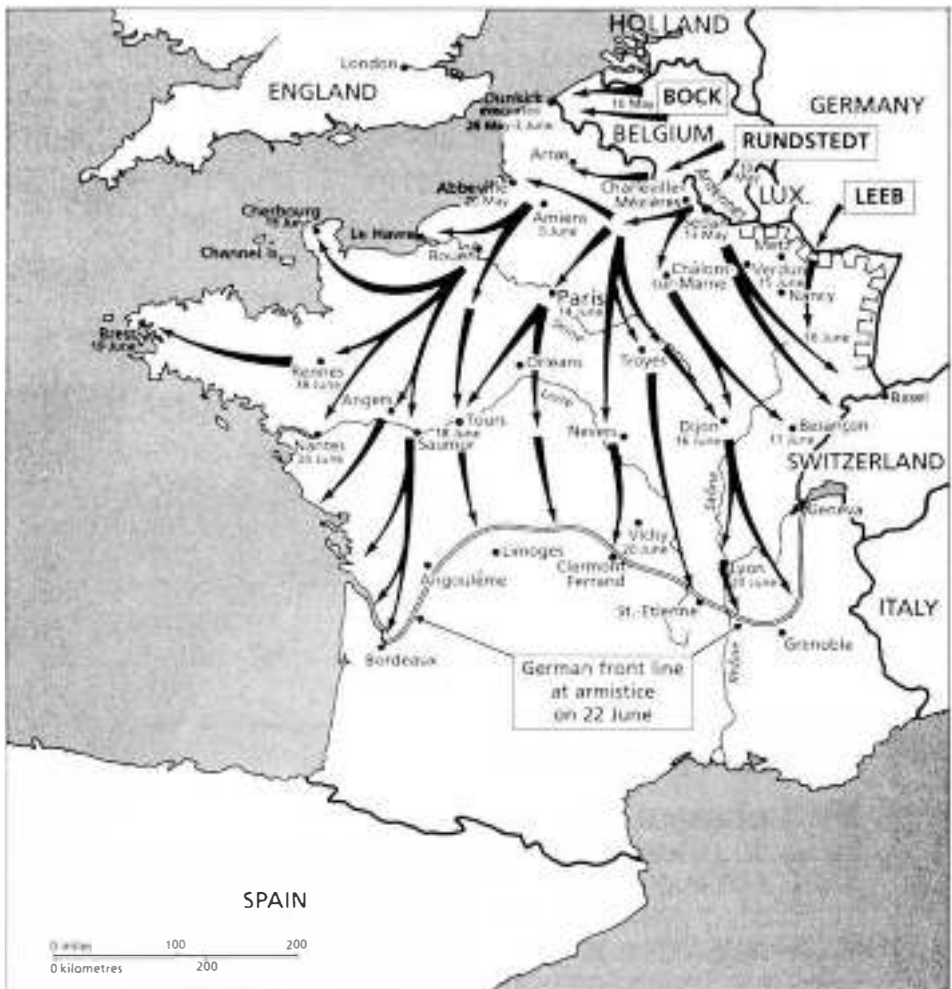
The paradoxes inherent even in the attempt to forget were already apparent in Mornet's book: a history of something that should be forgotten which in fact concluded that it could not be forgotten. The attempt to remember and to confront the past began in the 1970s with (to cite two very different but equally influential works) Marcel Ophüls' film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*), released in 1971, and Robert O. Paxton's scholarly study *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–44*, published in 1972. Most of what has been said and written about the Occupation since then has explored the questions such works opened up. Purely academic inquiry has moved in step with events in French public life which have made headlines outside France: the arrest and trial of French wartime officials for their misdeeds, for example, and the revelations which President Mitterrand chose to make just before his death about the ambiguities of his own past.



A myth of national heroism succeeded by a determination to investigate national shame: even so crude a description of how the French have lived with their past suggests the discomforts that history can hold fifty years afterwards. Yet, in its very crudity, the description hardly begins to answer the important questions about what really happened during the Occupation: what was heroic, what was shameful, in what proportions they flourished in the same soil,

and why. These, of course, were precisely the questions which prompted me to embark on this work.

The need to address them in a book designed for an English audience was confirmed by the reactions of various friends. Some, knowing I was writing a history of the Occupation, would still insist on referring to it as a history of the Resistance. Rather more asked me, with some embarrassment, if my research had 'lowered my opinion of the French'. I reminded the former that, sadly, a history of the Occupation is not the same thing as a history of the Resistance. I told the latter that it had not altered my respect for the French, though it had sometimes lowered my opinion of human nature, just as it had sometimes raised it. Those who look at how people in another time and another country behaved in an hour of darkness find no easy clue as to how they themselves might behave should they suffer a similar ordeal. Instead they find what Václav Havel, with his eye on different events altogether, had occasion to remind us in 1990: 'It is extremely shortsighted to believe that the face society happens to be presenting to you at a given moment is its only true face. None of us knows all the potentialities that slumber in the spirit of the population.'

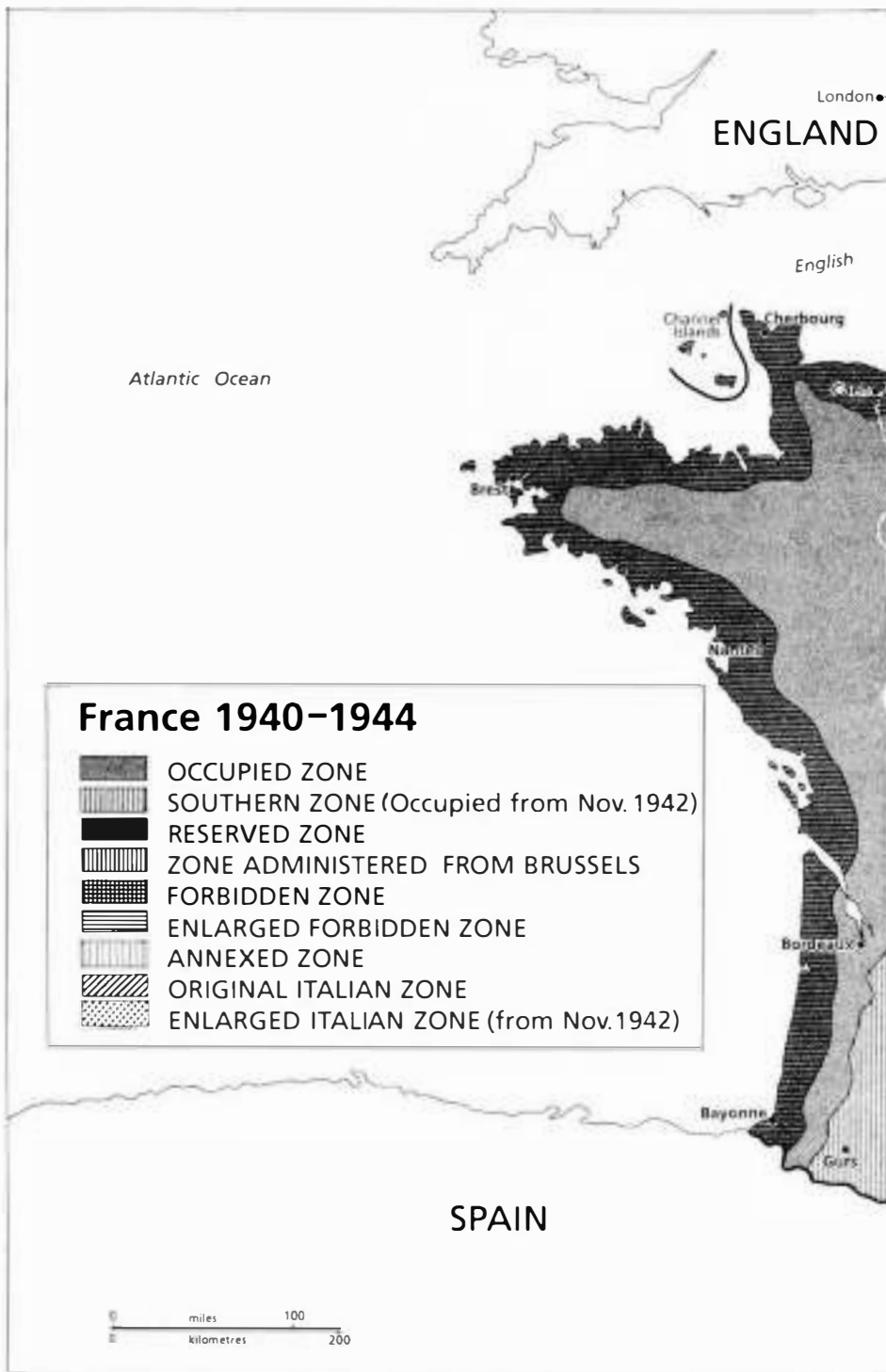
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*Cambridge*  
*February 1997*

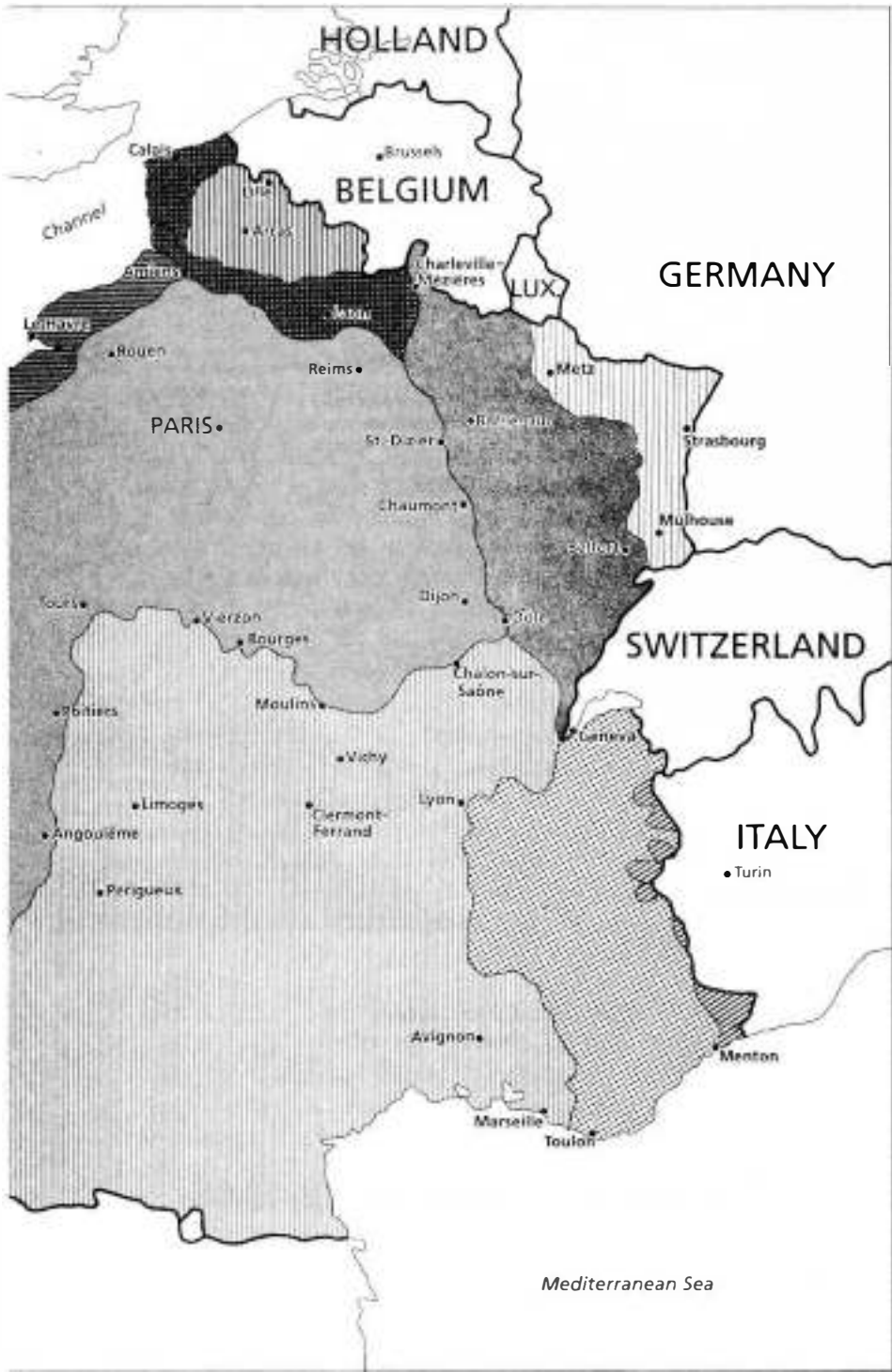


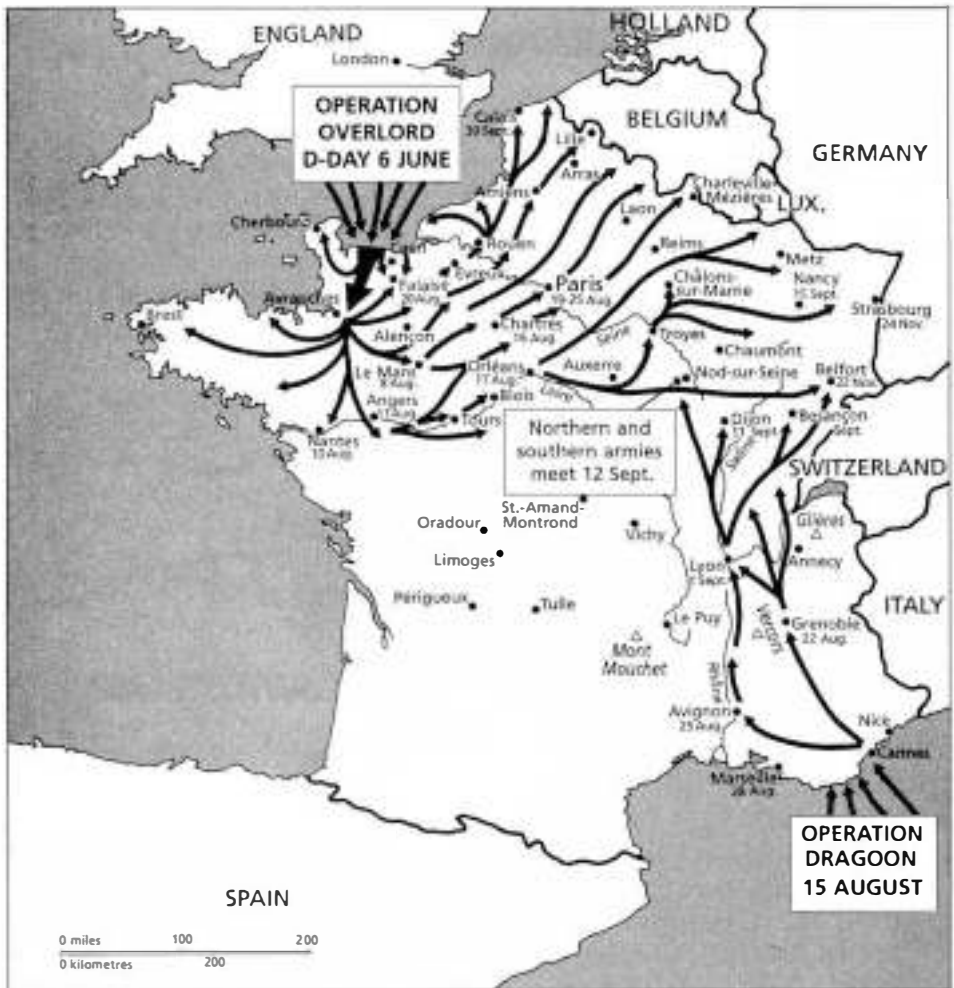
 German advance  
 Maginot Line  
 5 June Dates of occupation


## The Invasion of France, 1940









 Allied advance  
 30 Aug. Dates of liberation

## The Liberation of France, 1944

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## PROLOGUE

### *Verdun and Its Legacy*

This war has marked us for generations. It has left its imprint upon our souls. All those inflamed nights of Verdun we shall rediscover one day in the eyes of our children.

Pierre de Mazenod

**I**N BRITAIN WE identify the First World War and its legacy above all with the battle of the Somme. The name engraved on the French memory is Verdun. Indeed, Verdun might stand as the name for all the battles and all the wars France has fought over her unstable eastern border, in the disputed lands between the Meuse and the Rhine. At the Porte Saint-Paul, the smallest of the town's medieval gates, a tablet records that Verdun was besieged, damaged or destroyed in 450, 485, 984, 1047, 1246, 1338, 1552 and 1792, as well as in 1916. And, of course, the list fails to take account of the Second World War, unimagined and unimaginable when the tablet was put up in the 1920s. The most piquant reminder of what happened then is a plaque beneath the walls of Vauban's fortress, telling visitors that what is now a car park was, from 1940 until 1944, the site of the Gestapo headquarters.

The town has its stone and bronze memorials to the battle of 1916, but the scars themselves still show on the ring of hills straddling the Meuse to the north and east. With the river, the hills give Verdun its strategic importance. At first glance they make a pleasant change in an otherwise dull stretch of countryside. The forests have been replanted and, after an absence of fifty years or more, the birds have returned. Yet, despite being grassed over again, the ground is still pockmarked with saucer-shaped dips which were shell craters

and criss-crossed with ditches which were trenches. Remnants of artillery positions stand in the midst of the woods; scattered monuments mark where soldiers died or villages stood. On the ridge at Douaumont the skyline is dominated by the ghastliest monument of all, the Ossuaire (or charnel house) built in the shape of a huge artillery shell pointed at the heavens, holding the bones of perhaps 150,000 unidentified soldiers. It faces the military cemetery where a further 15,000 men lie beneath rows of white crosses.

The starkest relic is nearby Fort Douaumont, a sunken fortress showing hardly more than its concrete roof and its gun turrets above ground. Below lies a labyrinth of corridors, barrack rooms, munitions stores and latrines: a dripping, echoing tomb, still a place of nightmare and claustrophobia even though it is now lit by electricity rather than candles and kerosene lamps. It was built in response to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, when the fall of Verdun had set the seal on France's humiliation after her defeat by Count von Moltke's armies at Sedan, Metz and Strasbourg. The best-designed and best-equipped fortress of its day, it dominated the other forts which formed a three-ringed defence of the hills. These, in turn, were the key to a chain of fortifications which ran from Verdun along the eastern bank of the Meuse down to Toul and then, after a deliberate gap or *trouée de charmes* into which it was hoped the enemy might be enticed, along the Moselle from Epinal to Belfort. The whole system anticipated the Maginot Line of the interwar years in its spirit if not in its details and technology. France reacted to defeat in 1870 as she would to victory in 1918, protecting herself from the possibility of invasion from the east by digging herself sullenly into the soil. 'Rather be buried under the ruins of the fort than surrender' ordered the signs in the underground corridors of Fort Douaumont.

At the beginning of 1916 the military maps showed Verdun, Fort Douaumont and the other forts guarding the surrounding hills as what tacticians call a salient: a little bump sticking out from the Allied front lines which stretched down from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. Germany's thrust in September 1914 had brought its advance cavalry within 20 kilometres of Paris and the sound of its artillery within hearing of Parisians. Then it had failed: rallying from his original miscalculations and capitalizing on German mistakes, Marshal Joffre had achieved the 'Miracle of the Marne'. The Germans had been pushed back to positions which robbed them of any chance of the quick victory they had sought. As the next four

years would show, these positions also deprived the Allies of the same chance. It was, above all, to be a war of stagnation.

For the most part the contours of the battle line were dictated not by natural features but by accidents of the fighting. It was, says Alistair Horne, simply a 'line of exhaustion'. But the salient at Verdun owed more to the defence its hills provided than to the way the French had kept up the elaborate fortifications they had added. The forts were stripped of all but their fixed artillery and Douaumont itself, built for 500 men, had in fact less than sixty to defend it. French public opinion and politicians might have put their faith in defensive walls dug deep into the soil, but French military commanders clung stubbornly to their belief in *attaque à l'outrance*, the romantic bravado of the all-out charge. The discrepancy in military thinking would run through the history of the whole war, and beyond.

So in 1916 Verdun presented, not a soft target (there were no soft targets in the First World War), but an obvious one for any German offensive. The plan put forward by General von Falkenhayn and approved by Kaiser Wilhelm II called for the only major German attack between their unsuccessful thrust in 1914 and General Ludendorff's gamble in March 1918. The guns opened up at dawn on 21 February, announcing the start of a battle fought on the tactical principles which dominated the war. First the artillery laid a heavy barrage to knock out or soften up enemy positions and demoralize survivors. Then the infantry advanced to secure a foothold. Defenders in trenches, machine-gun posts and bunkers on both fronts were all too familiar with the unnerving rhythm: heavy explosions and deafening noise followed by an ominous quiet signalling that the hand-to-hand fighting was about to start.

The bombardment at Verdun was massive. The German artillery had 850 guns (as against the French 250), already supplied with two and a half million shells for the first six days of fighting. They included the Big Berthas, or Gamma Guns, firing shells almost as tall as a man and weighing over a ton. From the air the German lines looked like a single sheet of flame, and the noise could be heard more than 150 kilometres away. Trees were scythed down like so many matchsticks. Whole woods were uprooted and then blown into the air again by the next round of firing. The landscape was on its way to becoming the unearthly wasteland familiar today only through sepia or black-and-white photographs: distant prisms which

cannot fully evoke the cloying mud and discoloured pools of water, the reek of smoke, decaying flesh and shit, the ever-present rats and lice that made up the experience of battle.

On the French side, trenches were levelled, artillery positions mangled beyond recognition and machine-gun posts blown out of existence. The survivors were sometimes stunned or driven mad. Some did what soldiers often do after hours of tension: they fell asleep. During the late afternoon the German infantry began its advance in small patrols and raiding parties rather than in massed ranks. Some had flame-throwers fed from petrol canisters on their backs, a new weapon which could scorch men to death and even set fire to the timbers shoring up trenches. If the flame-thrower took an unlucky hit, its carrier turned into a human torch or sprayed his comrades with burning petrol. Darkness ended the hand-to-hand fighting on the first day but renewed the bombardment. Ten months of battle had begun.

At first, the tide seemed to be running wholly in the Germans' favour. On 25 February Fort Douaumont, still intact beneath the bombardment, fell with ludicrous ease: a mere handful of attackers took it without having to fire a shot. The French paid dearly for having neglected its defence. The loss had a devastating effect on the morale of troops in the field, of local civilians (who fled the already depleted town of Verdun virtually *en masse*) and, despite the best efforts of the wartime censors, on the nation as a whole. As for the effect on the course of the battle, one French divisional commander estimated that the loss of Douaumont would cost 100,000 lives.

Yet the German attack was getting bogged down – literally so in some places, for their heavy bombardment ploughed up the ground so effectively that it was often difficult or impossible to move the artillery forward to new positions. Though only about a quarter the size of Fort Douaumont, Fort Vaux proved a much tougher nut to crack; it fell in June after a seven-day siege. Elsewhere the battle had settled into minor fluctuations, local versions of the meaningless ebb and flow between fronts which typified the pattern of the First World War. On the west bank of the Meuse, assault and counter-assault surged over Côte 304 and the hill sinisterly named Le Mort Homme. On the east bank, the village of Vaux is said to have changed hands thirteen times in March. The Ouvrage de Thiaumont, a small fort near the site of the present Ossuaire, changed hands sixteen times during the summer. After the Germans failed to take

the fort at Souville, on the middle of the three rings of forts, the Kaiser seized the opportunity to sack Falkenhayn as Chief of the General Staff. His successor, Field Marshal von Hindenburg, ordered a virtual stop to the whole attack. The French recaptured Fort Douaumont in October and Fort Vaux in November. By mid-December they had pushed their front line a few kilometres east beyond Douaumont.

What had the 300 days of fighting cost? The statistics quoted for the battle of Verdun are no more precise or reliable than those for many of the events this book will describe. Yet most modern authorities would agree that the casualties on both sides reached a total of about 700,000, and that the French suffered more heavily than the Germans. Perhaps 162,000 French soldiers and 143,000 German soldiers were dead or missing in action. Taking into account the numbers engaged and the relatively small compass of the battlefield itself, the slaughter was on a scale for which the recorded history of western Europe can offer no parallel. And what purpose had it served? In fact, the Germans did not want Verdun and the French did not need Verdun. If the Germans had taken it, the way to Paris would still not have been open: the war would have continued its already established pattern of trench fighting on a static front. As for the French, they could have yielded Verdun without disadvantage. Indeed, withdrawal from the salient would have shortened their front line and husbanded resources.

The real reasons for the battle lay elsewhere. The German code-name for their attack was *Gericht*, which can mean a law court or tribunal but (as Alistair Horne points out) in this context means a place of execution. Falkenhayn's plan had been not so much to take Verdun as to draw the French into a defence which would bleed their army to death. And the French had been obliged to make the defence by a military code of honour which viewed any withdrawal as cowardice, any loss of ground as humiliation. It was a soldier's duty to hold his position, at whatever cost, and if the enemy did push him back it was his duty to try and recapture his position, at whatever cost. 'Do not surrender, do not yield an inch, let yourself be killed where you stand,' General Nivelle was still telling his troops in the summer of 1916.

Such absurdities of doctrine applied with particular force when the ground in question was Verdun, endowed with special meaning since its loss in 1870 had heralded the collapse of France herself. The



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