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The Fourth Estate: French Resistance to Nazi Occupation in the Press

Cover Page Footnote

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The Fourth Estate:

French Resistance to Nazi Occupation in the Press

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Abstract

Liberté, égalité, fraternité. The three totems of the French revolution have dominated the nation's cultural and political system for centuries. And even as the three estates, clergy, aristocracy, and as Abbé Sieyès questioned, « *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?* » in profound and impactful ways for the revolution, a fourth estate was growing and earning its place as the ardent protector of the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. First coined by political thinker Edmund Burke in 1787, the idea of the freedom of the press as the guardian of veritas and as essential to the workings of a democratic government, were called into action during the Second World War during the Nazi occupation of France. As the final check against corruption, authoritarianism, and injustice, many Resistance newspapers stood firm against the brutal Nazi regime. In particular, the *Defense de la France* newspaper, co-published by Hélène Viannay, took the call to action during the French Resistance to Nazi occupation. The outlet fought Nazi censorship and put its duty to the French people over profit by spending time and money in keeping the Free French informed, even if it meant their lives. They put aside political disagreements to fight one common enemy for the sake of their nation and people. In short, how did Defense De La France influence the people and resisters in France, and did they manage to bridge gaps in politics and creed? Did this particular newspaper step up to honor its responsibilities as one of the bastions of

the 4th Estate? What were their methods of distribution, attack on the Nazi party, and overarching operation? Ultimately, did Defense De La France accomplish their mission as honorees of the 4th Estate, or did they fall short?

Keywords: Resistance, Journalism, Second World War, Bastions

Introduction

Throughout history, the world has only seen a handful of instances in which a country cycles between revolution, evolution, and empowerment. France, from 1789 to present day can be categorized as one of these countries. France has been a courier of a revolutionary spirit since its overthrow of Absolutism beginning in 1789, and the trail of that spark can be seen throughout their history, from the collapse of monarchies to student protests and worker's strikes. However, one moment in French history shares a special resonance with the spirit of 1789 and the Fourth Estate associated with that era. The Resistance to Nazi occupation and aggression is arguably one of modern France's greatest endeavors. This grave moment in history granted France's bastions to the Fourth Estate--newspapers and guardians of free speech--to act and pursue the legacy left by their predecessors in the French Revolution of 1789. Though their emergence was necessary to the success of the French Resistance, was the network of underground newspapers successful in being bastions to the morals and values held by the likes of Marat and other revolutionary writers? How did they influence and motivate the oppressed citizens, and did they manage to bridge gaps in politics and creed? What were their methods of attack, distribution, and operation? Ultimately, did these Resistance Newspapers and authors achieve their goals and accomplish their mission as honorees of the original 4th Estate? By bridging gaps between creed and politics and focusing on influence and motivation, these Resistance newspapers, and Defense

De La France in particular, were able to uphold the values of the French 4th Estate and were successful in their mission as bastions.

The Fourth Estate

To further understand the positioning of the Fourth Estate as the media of the free people, one must understand the origins of the Third Estate that pushed for its emergence. The most common definition of the third estate could be appropriated from Abbe Sieyes' now famous pamphlet "*Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-Etat*" (see Figure 1).

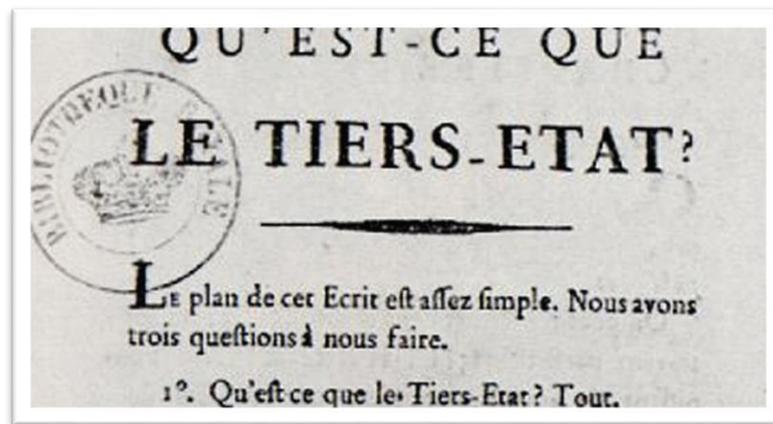


Fig. 1. Abbe Sieyes' famous pamphlet which defined France's Third Estate, stated their power, and launched the country into revolution (Sieyès 1).

As defined by Sieyes, the Third Estate is everything, counts for nothing vocally, but desires to become something in terms of French politics (Sieyès 1). Why is this 'definition' pertinent to the emergence of Media as the founders of France's Fourth Estate? As revolution wore on in 1789, the members of the uprising and pro-republic had few options in ways of spreading messages to the poor of Paris. The Ancien Regime and Clergy, 1st and 2nd Estates, held the belief that censorship in the way of absolutism be held as standard for the country, and that no criticism should be published. However, post 1789, the newly appropriated freedom of press allowed

many popular writers to gift the people of Paris a right never before seen, information. As the revolution wore on, writers such as Jean Paul Marat verbalized the most important of moments during the revolution, thus informing people of the actions taken against the former totalitarian regime (Hanson 87). This created a populous of forward-thinking citizens, who now, thanks to the media and news outlets, were informed and allowed to understand why the Ancient Regime must fall and democracy must win. Without efforts made by the Fourth Estate; these oppressed people would never have joined the movement that freed France from the grasps of absolutism. This is situation, as will be further discussed in this article, almost perfectly mirrors French Occupation by Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

French Situation in WWII

The actions of France as a whole during the Second World War is complex at best. From their early attempt of defense at the Maginot Line to the emergence of the Vichy Regime, the story of France in WWII is best known for their Resistance to Nazi occupation and control. On June 14th, 1940, the first German soldiers entered the now mostly desolate city of Paris (Rosbottom 66). The city which once held millions of citizens and a capitol for the French government now lacked both and gained an ugly award in its place. Though the original plan of the Nazi party was to keep a somewhat compassionate hold on Paris to better their own image within the eyes of Europe's governments (Rosbottom 66), this did not last, and many restrictions unfolded upon the Parisian masses. The country soon developed into a suppressed society in the north and a faux free, French-led country in the south as the Vichy regime took hold. The Nazi's soon spread their propaganda throughout Paris and the regions of the north, urging citizens to conform to the German identity and subconsciously strip themselves of their French identity. Soon, Parisians would lose their way of life, having its city "looted of its food stuffs and its

valuables, and that imposed curfews and other impediments on the daily life of Parisians” (Rosbottom 152). The situation become bleaker and bleaker as the 1940s waxed onwards, and the peaceful occupation was clearly a hoax at best. For many, this was the extent of the situation. The mere inconvenience of occupation was the only concern for many French people. However, the Jewish population, a very strong group in Northern France, was beginning to see Nazi aggression and prosecution. Almost forgotten in the eyes of many, but many Jews of the Parisian area faced a grave danger in the form of the Nazi Gestapo and SS soldiers. The situation faced by French Jews was identical to any who faced the Nazi’s, and many went to great lengths in hiding themselves and their loved ones:

The girl could see her brother’s small face peeking out at her from the darkness. He had his favorite teddy bear clutched to him; he was not frightened anymore. Maybe he’d be safe there, after all. He had water and a flashlight. And he could look at the pictures in his favorite book.... Maybe she should leave him there for the moment. The men would never find him. She would come back to get him later in the day when they were allowed to go home again. (Rosnay 8)

This excerpt from the novel Sarah’s Key describes perfectly the situation brought upon French Jews under Nazi occupation, a time of uncertainty, interruption, ignorance, and hate. This situation for France, was not one of simple occupation, but one of constant fear and defense. As many had before however, from the ashes of a beaten people, a voice of change and resistance will grow. As it did against its own tyrannical leaders in 1789, the journalists and writers of Paris rose to fight tyranny and prosecution once again.

Importance of Newspapers

Why the press? Why underground journalism? Why did the impact of words and information affect a people so greatly and so much so that it is worth researching and understanding? Words are powerful, and for a community deflated and powerless, it may just be the best line of defense. Many oppressed Parisians soon understood this in 1940, and thus sought to go to war with their knowledge of persuasion and journalism. Since the occupying Germans had made it clear that any symbolic form of French nationalism and patriotism was illegal, that was made a clear objective by the French press in the early stages of the Resistance. They urged the people to simply deny the armistice, raise the tri-color flag, and memorialize French war fighters at the Arc de Triumph (Gildea 62). This was the first dissent spread throughout Paris, pushed onwards by the now growing underground press. The movement grew, and was at times semi-spontaneous, but still persisted to send a clear message that the French people were not down for the count. Groups would start with “propaganda to shock public opinion out of its defeatism and resignation. This might start with graffiti or pasting up papillons or slogans the size of post-it notes in public places, and with the distribution of flyers, and then go on to the printing of a clandestine newspaper...” (Gildea 66). The situation in France in the 1940s allowed for unstoppable growth of these organizations as more and more saw these acts of resistance and thus followed suit. For many, this was the extent of their resistance to Nazi occupation, simply distributing pro-France propaganda and news became essential and was their sole focus. However, many went further. As the war carried on and intelligence became more vital to success, Yvonne Oddon, and her team of Musee de l’Homme origins, set about to change the way Resistance was approached. With their publication, *Resistance*, they urged, like many others, the French people to commit small acts of patriotic resistance to show that France still had a beating heart. However, beyond that, Oddon and her team, made of a melting pot of

backgrounds, set up intelligence networks and communicated frequently with the Allies (Gildea 67). This involvement marked a large movement from these clandestine outlets towards becoming true bastions of the Fourth Estate. As more and more outlets grew and found success in their publishing endeavors, more and more moved to supportive roles such as the ones played out by Oddon and her team. Of these remaining outlets, the most intriguing and suitable for investigation Helene Viannay's *Defense De La France*.

Defense De La France

Phillipe and Helene Viannay, and their publication *Defense De La France* (see Figure 2), began publishing in June of 1940, after the armistice allowing German occupation was signed.



Fig. 2. Defense De La France's edition dating to the 14th of July 1941. This paper portrays the nature of clandestine editorials during Nazi occupation (Viannay).

In response, at the famous Parisian Sorbonne University, a group of students and instructors founded what would come to be one of the most important clandestine newspapers of the French Resistance. Their growth and popularity were evident as they produced upwards of 15,000 copies of their premier edition in August of 1941 (Simkin 1). As the resistance progressed and

the war raged on, *Defense De La France* printed nearly half a million copies for their underground newspaper (Simkin 2). Their editions called for, like many clandestine papers of the time, the promotion of French nationalism and the disapproval and attack onto the Nazi occupiers. Viannay and her underground outlet specifically called for the French public to “resist oppression” against the occupation (Viannay 1). As the public seemed defeated, these constant urges by journalists to remain hopeful constituted a change that altered the outcome of the country’s resistance. Furthermore, *Defense De La France* refers to the Nazi’s as a pure and unwavering “enemy”, one that must be defeated by the only strength left in France, rather than a peaceful military force occupying their country (Viannay 1). Even without historical hindsight, it seems Viannay and the rest of the editors of *Defense De La France* understood the urgency in which the Nazi’s must be removed and also the damage the force could inflict once enraged. Therefore, as a group, *Defense De La France* purely acted in favor of their nation and those who reside within it, and thus take their first step towards acting bastions of the Republic of France. Over their span of nearly four years in resisting, *Defense De La France* published 47 issues with thousands of copies per issue being distribute, thus showing the immense scale their underground editorial consistently reached (Simkin 2). Within their overarching goals of inspiring resistance amongst the French people, Helene Viannay and *Defense De La France* greatly affected individuals, bridged gaps within creed and ideology, and evolved their methods of distribution and operation, thus, furthering their potential stance as true bastions of the Fourth Estate.

Methods of Operation

In order to gain influence and distribute nearly half a million copies of their paper without being discovered by Nazi officials, *Defense De La France* had developed an unapologetic attitude towards attack and the distribution of their product. Their method of attack

was fairly straightforward and consistent throughout the resistance, insight change within the people rather than commit physical violence. *Defense De La France*, as well as many other major underground outlets, called for “demonstrations” and small acts of French nationalism, which was outlawed under Nazi rule (Cobb 76). They begged the Free French to “free themselves from fear”, thus signifying that they would not rely upon physical attacks from within their ‘system’ (Holman 122). Their editorial pleas saw the development of “anti-German leaflets and graffiti”, many of which were committed via France’s large population of Jewish people, with Helene Viannay included (Cobb 76). The methods of distribution by Viannay and her team can be classified as a controlled chaotic pursuit. They flooded the streets with their message and even braved broad daylight to distribute their articles personally to the Parisians commuting daily (Holman 122). Their complete disregard for fear and covering their tracks again influenced the people greatly. This begged the question, if they can bravely risk their lives for the nation, how can I? Thus, a chain reaction effect could follow. Their influence did not end there, as it continued on as they reshaped the way creeds and ideologies were intermingled.

Influence

The Nazi occupation of France was unprecedented to the people of Paris. Very rarely before, and never within most lifetimes had Paris been occupied by a foreign legion. Yet, in 1940, they were, and the people, pushed to their psychological limits, found solace in each other. Connected by the likes of *Defense De La France* and other clandestine news agencies, people, in a time of Jewish persecution and questions of Aryan superiority amongst Europeans, were brought together to fight a common enemy despite hailing from separate creeds and ideologies. Foreigners, men, and women completely alienated by their homelands, sought to France as their saviors and in turn, fought extremely hard for the saving of it. Many ignored the important role

played by these foreigners as “what was entirely glossed over was the role of foreigners in the French Resistance” (Gildea 205). Within the *Defense De La France* editorial team, there were many individuals, foreign to the Parisian streets and French coastline, who played incredible roles in defending and producing the newspaper (Gildea 70). Helene Viannay herself came from Russian Bolshevik descent and was only a first-generation Frenchwoman (Gildea 71). Her mother was a “Russian Populist” and circulated freely around the European continent (Gildea 71). Her husband, Phillipe Viannay, was full blooded French and English, and many of those involved originated from varying European countries. This is the first of several examples of the work done by clandestine journalists in bridging gaps of creed. Beyond country of origins, the *Defense De La France* editorial group was also split by religious beliefs and political ideology. In fact, many of the group were faithful to Marshall Petain, the man seen by most of the French public as a collaborator, and anti-resistance. Phillipe Viannay was one of these faithful’s and saw potential in Petain’s leadership, “the group was divided over loyalty to Petain, who was seen by Phillipe Viannay as a hero who would in time come over to the Resistance and lead a united France to liberation...” (Gildea 71). This division, considering Helene Viannay was a staunch supporter of Free France and Charles De Gaulle, could be seen as unfavorable. However, only the opposite was true. Acceptance of different beliefs was a common theme portrayed throughout both the original Revolution of 1789, when journalists support all beliefs against the tyranny, and the Resistance to the Nazi’s in the early 1940’s. Newspapers called upon the people to not see themselves as a Petainist or De Gaulle supporter, or even socialist or democratic, but as one united people working to push Nazism out. It did not matter that Phillipe supported Petain, because he was still for resistance and for the exit of the Nazi’s, everything else was secondary. This was how clandestine editorials utilized their developed bridges within creeds to influence

the people. By setting an example of how other resistance groups should operate, *Defense De La France* and other news outlets convinced the people of France to fight as French for the first time in a long time, personal beliefs were not of importance.

Responsibilities and Honoring the Past

The purpose of analyzing *Defense De La France*, Helene Viannay, and clandestine newspapers in general, is to understand and decide, were these people true bastions and honorees to the original Fourth Estate? Did they uphold values of freedom of speech, rights to all creeds and ideologies, and supporting and informing the people to the very end? Throughout the resistance, the goals of these papers were clear and uniform, to end Nazi oppression and occupation. Throughout the Revolution of 1789, the goals of writers such as Marat were also fairly uniform, end absolutism and bring with it a new republic. In both scenarios, editorials had opinions, they had political views, they varied in methods of operation and severity of commitment, but they all were uniform in their overall goal of a free France. *Defense De La France* is a model, a case study amongst a larger subject of history. It was no more important than Odon's *Resistance* or any other underground newspaper for that matter. However, like people study Marat, studying a single outlet gives a greater knowledge and a deeper understanding. By analyzing *Defense De La France's* methods, organization, editing team, and belief system, you understand that the connection to the past is stronger than first thought. Viannay is Marat, she is unapologetic against her "enemy" just as Jean Paul Marat was against the French Monarchy (Viannay 1). The mission of the Fourth Estate, the press, in the Second World War, as it was in the 1789, was to inspire and inform the citizenry of its rights, its duties, and its responsibilities to protecting their voice in the political process. These newspapers resonated with the messages that Marat had spread during the French Revolution. As these

underground newspapers called the people to action, they took seriously their duties as members of the Fourth Estate to protect the liberties and freedoms of the French people. Therefore, *Defense De La France* and all clandestine newspapers of the French Resistance were true bastions and honorees of the original Fourth Estate.

Implications

Why does this matter? How does understanding clandestine newspapers have any form of impact on the world? It is a valid point, but then again why does one study history? To utilize the past to change the present. We live in a modernistic society that sometimes takes the efforts of journalism and the impact there following it for granted. There still is, however, oppressed people in this world (Hachten 229). The power of words and spreading a message is immense, and that power is demonstrated by the Fourth Estate and its bastions. To insight change with only your words is a quality everyone possesses. It is the bravery to take on tyrannical forces that must be mustered. In turn, understanding the powers and responsibilities of journalism, one better understands the power that the people wield and the ease with which, when freedom of the press is limited, we can descend quickly into misinformation, authoritarianism, and propaganda.

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