

Sandbach History Society

Report of the October 2023 meeting

Peter Solan: Resistance and Collaboration in France, 1940–45

Peter Solan, in his expansive analysis of “Resistance and Collaboration in France, 1940–45”, at a meeting of Sandbach History Society, began by saying that hatred and loathing of the Germans by the French started long before WW2.

It could be traced back to at least the Franco–Prussian War of 1870, when the German coalition forces, with their superior numbers, training and leadership, invaded north–eastern France. The Battle of Sedan resulted in almost the whole French Army being killed, wounded or captured and the biggest humiliation of all: the capture of Napoleon III.

Following the outbreak of war in 1914, the German Army invaded Luxembourg and Belgium and made it into northern France. The Battle of Verdun, which lasted for over a year, and in which there were over 377,000 French casualties, is deeply engraved in the minds of the French, he said.

Between WW1 and WW2 France was complacent and suffered from weak and unstable government whilst Germany was becoming a vibrant nation. In 1936 a powerful coalition of the left came to power but there were a massive rises in inflation and in unemployment and after 13 months the government fell.

On 10th May 1940 France was invaded by Germany. German troops by–passed the heavily fortified Maginot line and broke through the Ardennes, cutting off and surrounding the Allied units. When the war had been going on for only five days, the greatest military force on the Continent, said Mr Solan, declared that “We have been defeated. We have lost the battle.” Churchill tried to persuade the French government not to surrender by offering union with Great Britain but the offer was rejected. With 92,000 French soldiers dead and 2 million taken prisoner and transported to work in Germany, the French admitted defeat. An Armistice was signed on 22nd June.

Mr Solan asked how the unimaginable could happen. He suggested poor leadership, poor communication, indecision, an inadequate Air Force and poor deployment of tanks, as some of the reasons.

It was declared that there would be an occupied zone and a free zone. But the Germans had control of all the strategically important areas. Paris remained an open city but the seat of government, now headed by Philippe Petain, was moved to Vichy. Petain said that to maintain French unity, the government must enter into a pact of collaboration with the Germans. Mr Solan said certain groups in society were keen collaborators: the right wing, the militia, anti–Semites, businessmen, public officials, and the Catholic church. He also pointed out that Soviet Russia was seen as a big threat and many ordinary people preferred Hitler to Stalin.

A *Resistance* movement grew as the war moved on. It was made up of communists, anti–fascists, patriots, students, and former soldiers. Among their number were many “*marquis*” – young men who had escaped conscription into the STO (*Service du travail obligatoire*)

which provided forced labour for Germany. The Resistance movement worked with groups like the British SOE (*Special Operations Executive*) whose members were parachuted into occupied territory to conduct espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance. The BBC ran *Radio Londres*, its programmes containing coded messages to the Resistance.

Mr Solan said the Resistance was a collection of small disparate groups until they became linked in 1944 to form the FFI (*French Forces of the Interior*). He went on to say that they were remarkable people and their personal sacrifices and contributions cannot be over-estimated – but their achievements have been exaggerated by history. He ranked their activities in order of importance, the highest being the provision of intelligence (troop movements, arms locations) and rescue works, providing escape routes for Jews and British troops. He had reservations about achievements in propaganda, sabotage and assassination. He also pointed to reprisals carried out in response to *Resistance* activities where French civilian hostages were shot or, in the case of Oradour-sur-Glane, a whole village was razed to the ground.

In 1943, the Vichy authorities set up the *Milice francais* (French Military), a paramilitary organisation to help fight against the French Resistance. It participated in torture, summary executions and assassinations. Jews were subjected to vicious propaganda, had their French citizenship revoked, their businesses seized and had to wear a yellow badge. The *Milice* were used to help round up the Jews.

Immediately following Liberation, France was swept by *epuration sauvage* (a wild purge) with a wave of executions, public humiliations (women having their hair shaved, or paraded naked through the streets, for example), assaults and detentions of suspected collaborators. Later came *epuration legal* (the legal purge). Trials were conducted from 1944 to 1949 and approximately 300,000 cases were investigated. 6,763 were sentenced to death but only 791 were executed. Petain was condemned to death but his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

Collaboration was a feature of national shame and the authorities kept quiet about aspects such as sending Jews to Auschwitz. It was denied by Presidents De Gaulle and Mitterand and only in 1995 did President Chirac publicly recognise France's responsibility for deporting thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps.

Mr Solan concluded his presentation by looking at France after the war. He said the French economy, its industries and agriculture boomed for 30 years with an annual growth of 5 per cent. How much of this, he asked was it because of the Resistance to German occupation or collaboration with Germany so that towns were not bombed, factories not destroyed and industries were maintained.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be "An Evening with Pauline and Stephen Minshull" on Tuesday 7th November in Sandbach Library at 8.00 pm. Visitors are welcome but should contact 01270 760810 to check on the availability of places. For further details see www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk

John Higgins