

BOOKS

Behind the heroic myth

Nicholas Shakespeare welcomes a sweeping account of the French Resistance that gives credit to those previously overlooked by de Gaulle

FIGHTERS IN THE SHADOWS

by Robert Gildea



608PP, FABER, £20, EBOOK £8.99

★★★★★

Thirstily swallowed by a humiliated France, the dominant narrative of the French Resistance was cooked up by General de Gaulle – “Joan of Arc in trousers”, Churchill testily called him – when he addressed the crowds outside the Hôtel de Ville on August 25, 1944. “Paris liberated! Liberated by its own efforts, liberated by its people with the help of the armies of France, with the help of all of France.” Yet, as Robert Gildea exposes in this comprehensive survey of

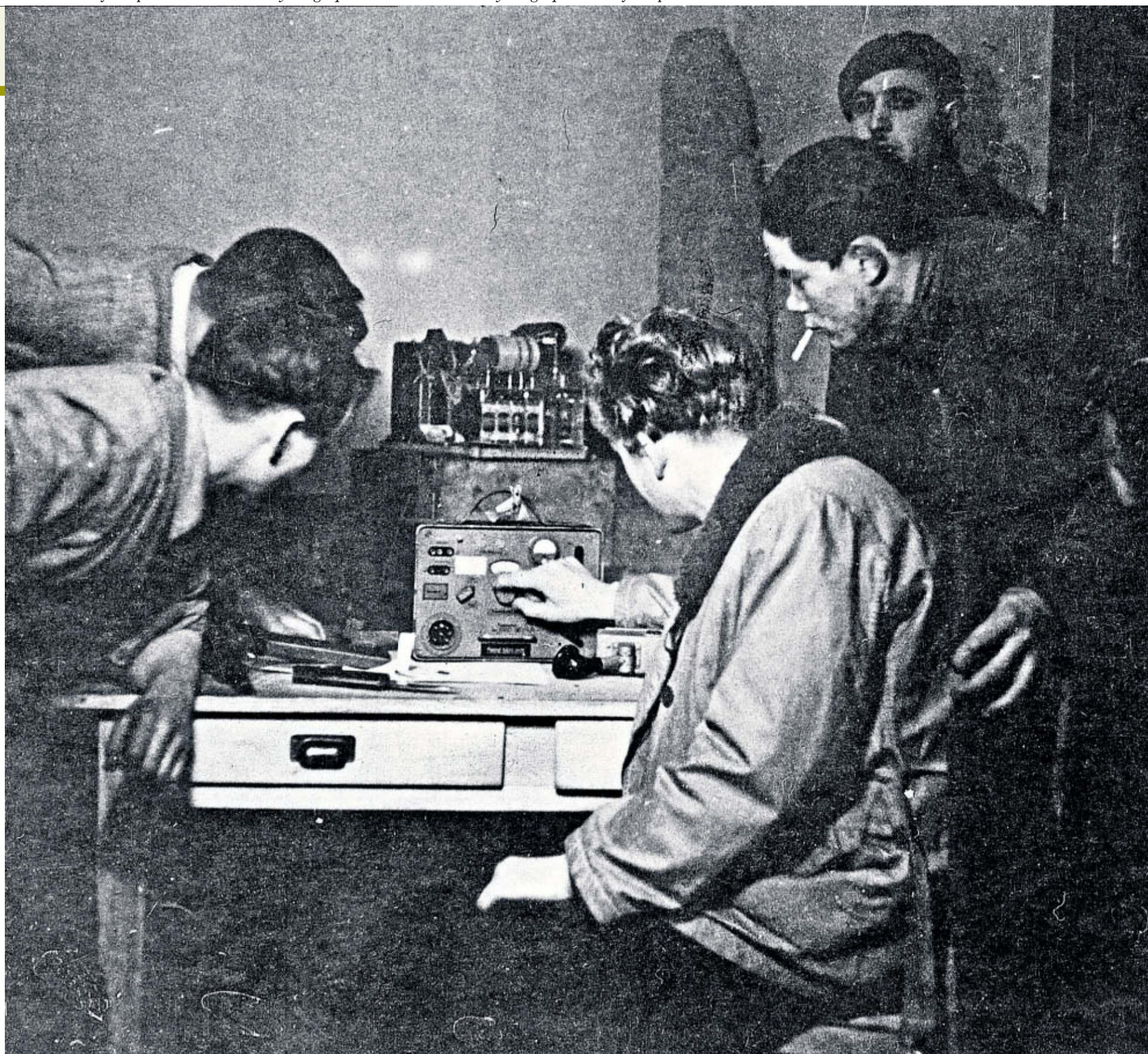
French people. The vast majority learnt to muddle through under German Occupation and long admired Marshal Pétain.” *Attentisme* – “wait and see” – was the most obeyed order of the day. It took until 1971 for a counter-narrative to surface, in the documentary *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, which suggested that the French, instead of behaving honourably under the Occupation, “had been supine, cowardly, and only too frequently given to collaboration”.

It bears repeating that an astonishing one and a half million French soldiers remained POWs in Germany until 1945, putting pressure on political activists back home, notably communists, to form the opposition. But French Communist Party bosses, answerable to Moscow, “always controlled an agenda that had little to do with the Resistance”. One contemporary observer sneered: “The PCF led its resisters to the Rubicon – to go fishing.”

Neutralised for the first two years of the war by the Nazi-Soviet pact, which made Hitler their ally, the French communists were led by Jacques Duclos, “who lived a quiet life disguised as a ‘country doctor, 1900 style’”. Meanwhile, their general secretary, Georges Marchais, worked in a German factory as a volunteer. Hardly models of heroism.

Not until Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941 did a more convincing resistance emerge, gaining pace with the *Relève* of June 1942, in which Vichy’s chain-smoking Prime Minister, Pierre Laval, promised the release of one French POW for every three volunteers to work in Germany; the following February, the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* turned this into a compulsory order, directed at all men of military age. The result: up to 40,000 young men – the Resistance was 80 per cent composed of those under 30 – joined the maquis rather than go to Germany (although 650,000 did end up going). But as Gildea points out, the maquis were beset by problems – lack of

Fighting talk: maquisards learn to use a radio during the war



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A literary giant – and he knew it

A long awaited biography of Gore Vidal is not afraid to explore his flaws, says *Duncan White*

EVERY TIME A FRIEND SUCCEEDS SOMETHING INSIDE ME DIES

by Jay Parini



480PP, LITTLE, BROWN, £25, EBOOK £16.99

★★★★★

By the age of 25, Gore Vidal had written five novels, bought a huge pile on the Hudson River and claimed to have had more than 1,000 sexual partners. He had served on a transport ship in the Aleutian Islands off Alaska during the war and then, in *The City and the Pillar*, written one of the most important gay novels of the 20th century while living in an old convent in Guatemala. He had been pursued by Anaïs Nin in New York, met André Gide in Paris and EM Forster in London, and chased streetboys with Tennessee Williams in Rome. He wasn’t hanging around.

This impatience for achievement never left him. As Jay Parini’s new biography details, Vidal dreaded losing momentum, fearing the obliterating strokes of what he called the Great Eraser. This entailed a kind of creative promiscuity: he never finished one book before he had started the next, twice ran for political office,

had two Broadway hits and wrote scores of screenplays and essays while, of course, never missing the chance to appear on television.

It was the small screen that made him big. While many high-minded intellectuals disdained television, Vidal realised its power. On screen, he exuded patrician charm and weary disdain, nonchalantly saying the unsayable and getting under his rivals’ skin.

In 1968 he was pitted against the conservative intellectual William F Buckley in a series of debates as Republicans and Democrats selected their presidential candidates. The country was in a febrile state, with Vietnam protesters on the streets, the police responses brutal. The televised debates captured this antagonistic moment: at one point, Vidal goaded his opponent by calling him a “crypto-Nazi”; Buckley bared his fangs, called Vidal “a queer” and threatened to “sock” him.

Vidal’s reputation as a scourge of the establishment was made. In his celebrated essays,

many of the best published in *The New York Review of Books*, he attacked the corruption of politics by corporations, the Cold War excesses in national security spending, homophobia, racism, the war on drugs and almost every aspect of American foreign policy. He relished revisionary history, debunking

Vidal decorated his study walls with framed magazine covers of himself

the reputations of revered presidents. And, at his best, he was nastily funny (his takedown of John Updike, for example, is justly famous). The thumping great *United States: Essays 1952-92* is his enduring testament.

Even the most ambitious and sweeping of his essays was always personal. Vidal’s was a life lived in the public eye and he mythologised

it as he went along, drawing on a store of polished anecdotes to charm his many interviewers. He wrote two memoirs, *Palimpsest* (1995) and *Point to Point Navigation* (2006), and appointed Walter Clemons as his official biographer.

When Clemons failed to complete the work, Vidal asked Parini, whom he had befriended in the mid-Eighties, to take over. Parini agreed, but would only publish the book after Vidal was dead, as he was sure it would cost them their friendship. In the meantime, Parini recommended Fred Kaplan, who in 1999 produced a thorough biography that the controlling Vidal – inevitably – hated. Vidal, apparently, was insistent that Parini write the book, and gave him access to his diaries, letters and friends. They also spent a good deal of time in each other’s company, right up until his death in 2012.

All of which leaves Parini, as a biographer, in rather a difficult position. His closeness to Vidal leaves him open to accusations of

being either a hagiographer or a back-stabber. He is respectful – at times reverential – of Vidal’s work while being honest, often ruthless, about his personal flaws. For the most part, Parini keeps his balance. Vidal gauged his ultimate success by his stature as a novelist and felt slighted when he was praised for his essays instead. Parini tells one anecdote in which Vidal, over a boozy lunch with Leonard Bernstein, insisted he was one of the greatest two novelists alive (the other being Saul Bellow). This, needless to say, was misguided.

Taking Vidal’s fiction seriously is clearly an important way for Parini to honour his legacy. This means he rather relentlessly champions even the silliest of Vidal’s satires (*Kalki, Duluth*) in the face of their often hostile critical reception; in his admiration of the early historical novels (*Burr* and *Lincoln* especially) he is on far safer ground. Parini struggles to find good things to say about

Patrician charm: Gore Vidal in 1981



the later novels, which became increasingly hobby-horsical and hectoring. The truth is, Vidal’s influence as a public intellectual far exceeds his status as a novelist. Books like *The City and the Pillar* and *Myra Breckinridge* are interesting for what they said about changing American sexual mores, but the majority of his fiction has not lasted.

Parini is frank about Vidal’s “exhausting and debilitating” narcissism. Like Narcissus, Vidal claimed to disdain love, despite living with his partner Howard Austen for half a century; again like Narcissus, he was captivated by his own reflection, decorating the study walls in his spectacular Ravello villa with framed magazine cover portraits of himself. In later years he also lost himself, this time in an ocean of single malt.

Alcohol was the lubricant for Vidal’s decline. His mother had been an alcoholic and

Vidal staggered down the same path, later polishing off a bottle of Scotch a day on his own. The booze – and hangovers – fed his paranoia, thinned his skin and dulled his judgment. “When he was drunk, he could seem terribly racist and anti-Semitic,” Parini writes, although insisting that neither of these prejudices “ran deep”.

In these later years, he became conspiratorial – what Christopher Hitchens, in a full-frontal attack on his former mentor, called Vidal’s “crackpot strain”. He had long claimed that Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew in advance about the attack on Pearl Harbor; after 9/11, he began to insinuate that Bush and Cheney knew about those attacks, too. Overreaches of this sort made it easier to dismiss some of his valid critiques of contemporary politics, such as the excesses of the Patriot Act.

Most embarrassing, though, was his misguided defence of Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, as “a Kipling hero, a boy with an overdeveloped sense of

weapons, training and leadership – which led to a succession of disastrous setbacks and reprisals. In Ruines, one person per house was shot in retaliation, including a child of seven. Gildea leaves the reader wondering, subversively, whether the outcome might have been radically different had the French shown no resistance at all until after the Free French Army landed in Provence on August 15, without taking part in the Normandy landings.

Gildea tells a story that will be less appealing to French audiences than earlier tellings. He provides an authoritative picture of “the breadth and diversity of resistance activity that developed in hidden corners of France”. In his view, “the story of the French Resistance is central to French identity”. In contesting the Gaullist version,

De Gaulle underplayed the vital contribution made by women

Gildea, author of a classic earlier text on the Occupation, *Marianne in Chains*, suggests that it may be more accurate “to talk less about French Resistance than about resistance in France”.

Fighters in the Shadows restores to their rightful position those omitted from de Gaulle’s narrative: not least the Allied armies, led by Churchill and Roosevelt, who referred to de Gaulle as “our mutual headache”. It also considers the foreign fighters, whose role de Gaulle ignored: anti-fascists from Spain, economic emigrants from central and eastern Europe, Jewish refugees and British operatives from SOE. Consideration is given to rivals of de Gaulle, such as General Giraud, for two years joint commander-in-chief in North Africa, but “airbrushed out of the Gaullist account... as if he had never existed”, just like the 4,000 black African troops who had fought alongside General Leclerc.

Also underplayed by de Gaulle’s all-male, all-white nationalist vision was the vital contribution made by women, not least by de Gaulle’s own niece Geneviève. As the résistante Germaine Tillon later recalled: “It was women who kick-started the Resistance.” Asked by a German court in Lyon in May 1942 why she had taken up arms, Marguerite Gonnet replied: “Quite simply, colonel, because the men had dropped them.” Yet women were removed from the front line when de Gaulle finally arrived, and passed over for military honours.

The truth is that the Resistance was always deeply divided, with highly individual leaders such as Henri Frenay and Jean Moulin competing, and clashing over their vision: whether a national insurrection to create a new society (favoured in metropolitan France by the communists) or a national liberation to restore the old order (favoured by de Gaulle’s anti-communist HQ in London). Not until May 1943, in a landmark meeting in a small flat near Saint-Sulpice, did all internal resistance movements come together under the local umbrella of Jean Moulin, and acknowledge the overall leadership of de Gaulle. A month later, Moulin was arrested in Lyon (it is still not clear who betrayed him).

“We never laughed so much as in the Resistance,” recalled the underground journalist Robert Salmon. It must be said that Gildea does not capture much of this humour, preferring in his dispassionate way to dwell on the intricacies of communist committees; but nor, to his credit, does he get diverted by melodrama or personalities. The result is a serious book that deserves to be taken seriously, both here and, more importantly, by historians across the Channel who have relied too long on de Gaulle’s words. As Christian Pineau, leader of Libération-Nord, said of de Gaulle after meeting him in London in March 1942: “he knows almost nothing about the Resistance”.



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