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Author(s): Frederick Busi

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Comment

MARCEL OPHULS AND THE SORROW AND THE PITY

Frederick Busi

There can be no shame in being conquered by an adversary more robust and prepared long in advance. Collaboration with Germany would seem acceptable to me, even desirable, if I were sure it were fair.
—*André Gide, 1941*

IN THE EUPHORIC MAY DAYS OF 1968 the personnel of France's rigidly censored state television monopoly foresaw a new era of freedom and experimentation. Like the rest of working class France, the personnel went out on strike in protest against government restrictions. Among the strikers was Marcel Ophuls, son of Max Ophuls, the celebrated director of *Lola Montes* and *Liebelei*, who had already begun work on his documentary masterpiece on life in France during the German occupation. When Marcel Ophuls and his friends returned to work they were promptly fired. In search of a job, he found himself back in his native Germany where he worked for six months in Hamburg. Growing dissatisfied with that position, he decided to resume work on his documentary, and finally it was completed and had its world premiere in Germany. Later it was viewed on Swiss television.

Upon first seeing *The Sorrow and the Pity* one has the impression that Ophuls was not in total control of his materials: frequent repetitions and inordinate length—four and one half hours—leave some editorial discretion to be desired. But the film, Ophuls cautions, was designed for television broadcasting and was supposed to be shown in two segments. With this aim still in mind he tried again to have it shown where it all took place, in France. But his film was banned from television for a variety of complex and irksome reasons which illuminate that country's reluctance to relive the humiliating years of defeat and collaboration with Germany.

The Massachusetts Review

Ophuls hoped that his film would be seen by some six million viewers, but the national director of that service, de Bresson, objected for two outstanding reasons. De Bresson informed Ophuls that it did not seem fitting a German should pass judgment on that period of French history and that the film would disturb too many people who needed to believe in certain myths.

Despite his German background, Ophuls is a Jew and since 1937 a naturalized French citizen. Like other refugee families in the thirties, the Ophuls family found a temporary haven in France. When the war came, they were caught off guard yet managed to leave France for America in 1941, a departure which suggests the *bon mot* of Tristan Bernard: "The optimists went to Auschwitz and the pessimists to New York." Judging by his film it would seem that Ophuls still remains a pessimist. Yet it is important that his work has attempted to set the record straight on a subject that has been distorted for so long by official myths and Hollywood. It would be easy to see why many Frenchmen do not care to be reminded of this miserable chapter of their nation's recent history. Such memories are acutely painful because victors and vanquished alike are interested in retaining only what fits their partisan views of history.

The French government is particularly concerned to calm the country's factional politics. In the aftermath of the last colonial wars, there began a mild resurgence of hagiographies dealing with the personality and role of Marshal Pétain. By the middle sixties numerous studies appeared, largely apologetics, attempting to brighten up the image of one of France's great military heroes who died in prison in 1951.¹ In these works and elsewhere old arguments from the war years were dusted off and served up anew. The image of Pétain as the only true resister continued to gain ground in those conservative circles which had an interest in presenting France's national leader from 1940 to 1944 in a more favorable light. Suggestions had been offered to transfer Pétain's ashes to Douaumont, one of Verdun's battle sites where he had played a major role. Such a project was strongly opposed by forces on the Left, whereas the Right, through its friends and spokesmen in government, kept pressing for the plan. De Gaulle's and Pompidou's regimes have made overtures to the Right designed to assuage the feel-

¹ See Gilbert Jeantet, *Pétain contre Hitler* (Paris: la Table Ronde, 1968); Georges Blond, *Pétain* (Paris: Presse de la Cité, 1966); Alfred Conquet, *Autour du Maréchal Pétain* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1963); and Paul Bourget, *Un certain Maréchal Pétain* (Casterman, 1966).

Marcel Ophuls

ings of ostracism that have persisted since the Liberation through the Indochinese and Algerian wars. At the height of national insurrection in 1968, de Gaulle was forced to acquiesce to army demands to release from prison rebellious comrades who plotted his overthrow in 1961. This policy of appeasement proved to be one of the most effective ways of crushing the students' and workers' uprising.

In the area of foreign affairs much has changed in France's general attitude toward Germany. Old quarrels have been abandoned. By the middle sixties thousands of Frenchmen from Alsace-Lorraine daily streamed across the border to work in more affluent Germany. And in 1972 the Maginot Line was sold to German businessmen hard pressed to acquire land outside of their overcrowded country. Frenchmen quipped that this sale was fitting since the Maginot Line was built for them in the first place. However, many Frenchmen still found certain attitudes, often ambivalent, hard to change, particularly in regard to the occupation years.

The completion of Marcel Ophuls' film coincided with a series of minor though irritating incidents which have somewhat embarrassed the French government and which may partly explain its reaction to his work. In the late sixties news reports began to surface suggesting government laxity in prosecuting known war criminals. In November 1971 the president of the republic pardoned a convicted war criminal, Paul Touvier, who was a local head of Vichy's militia, responsible for hunting down and killing dissidents, Jews and partisan fighters. In a later clarification Pompidou specified that Touvier was not really pardoned but merely allowed restitution of his property, which some have claimed was largely stolen from his victims. The case of Touvier is somewhat related to that of a Gestapo agent, Klaus Altmann Barbie, known as the butcher of Lyons, who now lives in Bolivian exile. The French government displayed little zeal in seeking his extradition to stand trial for mass murder. And sensing the feelings of French officials the Bolivian government simply refused to consider extradition.

These cases reflect a larger reticence on the part of Pompidou's administration to prosecute war criminals. It seems to underscore a greater reluctance to focus attention on that painful period which might in any way cast doubt on the official myth of a France completely crushed by vastly superior forces, suffering at the hands of a small group of traitors who were resisted by large numbers of underground fighters. Ophuls' film suggests, even shows, that the opposite view of history may be a more accurate portrait of France during the last war.

The Massachusetts Review

Today it is difficult to view the Vichy regime through anything but the eyes of the victorious allies. But this natural distortion hinders a serious examination of its origins and policies. It should be recalled that Pétain was not at first a puppet chosen by the Germans to serve their interests. The aging Marshal received a mandate from Lebrun, the last president of the moribund Third Republic, to stay on in France, meet the Germans and arrange the most advantageous armistice terms. This is precisely what the ancient war hero thought he was doing and what the rest of the country hoped he was doing. It has been variously estimated that some 80 per cent of France supported Pétain at the beginning of his regime. Most governments immediately recognized his authority over his truncated domain. Roosevelt's administration recognized him as chief of state until as late as 1942. The politicians and parliamentarians, who fled France through no choice of their own, left behind the vague feeling that they had somehow brought about France's debacle and were then fleeing the consequences of their acts. This general malaise would easily serve the purposes of the anti-British, pro-German factions in Vichy. It should also be recalled that when General de Gaulle left Bordeaux for England, officially he represented no one but himself and a very small band of followers. This lack of authority, combined with his heroic megalomania, alienated him at first from the allied councils until they realized the Vichy regime was too subservient to Germany's war aims.

Curiously enough, both de Gaulle and Vichy tended to cultivate that durable myth about France's defeat, that the country had been doomed to defeat at the hands of a vastly superior enemy. Both sides found the conspiracy theory helpful to their respective causes, mainly to assuage the pain of defeat and humiliation. In retrospect it now appears that militarily, in terms of manpower and materiel, France was almost on an equal footing with Germany. As late as 1937 France had the world's largest well-equipped army. What was lacking was the indispensable commodity of leadership and foresight. During the period of the "phony war," from September 1939 to May 1940, France like the rest of the world was mesmerized by Hitler's dazzling diplomatic and military successes. France's decline began long before Pétain came to power.

Ophuls' film on these years was destined to unsettle viewers of differing political backgrounds. Yet despite its inordinate length the film does not pretend to chronicle every facet of life under the occupation. Instead, Ophuls chose the city of Clermont-Ferrand, in the Auvergne region, because it was an average French city, not far from Vichy, but

also because it was there that the resistance to the invaders and their supporters began. Ophuls cut the film into two segments. The first section, entitled, "The Collapse," deals with the rout of the French army, and the second more controversial part, "The Choice," examines the varied human responses. The film consists mainly of documentary materials from the war period with commentaries registered thirty years later that often involve the same personalities. Ophuls tries to interview both sides of the conflict, partisans and collaborators, as well as a good number of ordinary folk in between.

On the side of the Resistance Ophuls introduces a wide variety of characters. The earliest members of the underground were often drawn from a highly diffused and small segment of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Those rare representatives of the *monarchists* who chose to resist were loath to cooperate with the socialists and communists. This original phase of the opposition was minimal, for most Frenchmen were still in that extended stupor which crystallized during the "phony war" period and solidified after their colossal military defeat. Some cynics have suggested that the Resistance grew in direct proportion to the reversals that Germany suffered in battle. And while this may appear true statistically, it would be difficult, even unseemly, to question the motives of the early members of the fledgling opposition. One might also say that the Resistance grew in proportion to the increase of hardship and humiliation inflicted by the Germans and their allies.

In the film, communist leader Jacques Duclos is shown, though it is not clear what he had to do with the Resistance in Clermont-Ferrand. Indeed, he might have had nothing to do with it were it not for Hitler's violation of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact. From September 1939 till June 1941 national and international socialists were technically comrades and the latter refused to get involved in an imperialistic war against Stalin's erstwhile ally. Only when Hitler attacked Russia did they automatically spring into action to provide new recruits, discipline and superb organization to the growing ranks of the *Maquis*.

Representative of the bourgeoisie that resisted was Col. Gaspard. Generally speaking, the upper-middle class, industrialists and merchants, found collaboration profitable, whereas the lower-middle class were more inclined to resist. Ophuls was criticized for including Gaspard's comments but, as Ophuls commented, Gaspard was a little drunk during his interview.² Each viewer of this film will doubtless be touched

² Transcript of interview with Marcel Ophuls on Columbia Broadcasting System program "Camera Three" on October 1, 1972, p. 8.

The Massachusetts Review

by a particular encounter. Ophuls himself prefers to recall his talk with a merchant, Marius Klein, who out of fear of being mistaken for a Jew (he is not) placed a notice in the local paper proclaiming his integral Frenchness and Catholicism. This average French businessman is led by a series of questions to his avowal and the camera captures his pained expression. He simply felt jeopardized by being mistaken for an undesirable. It has been objected that Ophuls on this occasion was perhaps too severe in condemning a man concerned over his personal safety. Yet Ophuls responded to such criticism by noting that the shopkeeper's action was taken in 1940, long before the Germans began their program of genocide. Viewed in this double light Marius Klein appears to be either a prophet or a contributor to France's overall distress.

Still, Ophuls is at his best inviting the average citizen to probe into the past, into his conscience. In some cases there does not appear to be any conscience to probe. One memorable encounter took place in the courtyard of the Lycée Pascal where two ancient teachers, Danton and Dionnet, repeated their recollections to Ophuls or, more accurately, to the line of questioning which squeezed the truth out of them. Ophuls: "When you noticed the Jewish professors disappear, then the Jewish students, then other young boys involved in the opposition, didn't you ever think of organizing a protest or resigning *en masse*?" Danton and Dionnet: "It's obvious you're not familiar with teachers!"

The person who suffered most from the interviews, according to Ophuls, was Count René de Chambrun, international lawyer, descendant of Lafayette, man of influence and contacts in America, and son-in-law of Pierre Laval. Since the war Chambrun has spent much time, money and energy trying to rehabilitate Laval's name by claiming that his policy of collaboration and *attentisme* was, under the circumstances, the best route to follow. Chambrun tried to explain that, thanks to his father-in-law, 95 per cent of the French Jews were spared the gas chamber. But Ophuls would not let this pass, and reminded the shocked count that in reality some 50 per cent of the Jews in France were sent to their deaths. Vichy had set to work denaturalizing as many Jews as possible—usually foreign born—in order to turn them over, along with their children, to the Germans. And this before the Germans made such requests. This policy of segregation and despoliation was carried out with Vatican approval.³

³ Pierre Laval is usually cast in the light of an archvillain. The latest study on him treats his life with more understanding. See Geoffrey Warner, *Pierre Laval and the Eclipse of France* (New York: Macmillan, 1968). For de

One of the most damaging aspects of Laval's policy of collaboration was the fact that France did not really benefit from the arrangement. France was not better off than other Western European countries that had refused to go along with Germany. All the methods used by Vichy—terrorism, repression, deportation of political and racial undesirables to death camps—gave France no privileged position in the New Order.

The conversation with biologist Claude Lévy illustrates the most vicious aspect of Vichy's policies. Lévy, the author of a study on France's solution of the Jewish problem, recounted how on the night of July 16, 1942, thousands of Jews in Paris were rounded up, jailed and shipped off to death camps, not by the Gestapo nor by fascist thugs but by average French policemen acting under orders from Vichy.⁴ Although thousands of Frenchmen forewarned and sheltered the victims at great personal risk, there were no such public demonstrations of solidarity as in Holland and Bulgaria, no widescale escape network as in Denmark. On the score of saving and dooming its Jews, France ranked on a level with Romania, a classic land of visceral antisemitism.

In the course of viewing this film, one feels the conflicting pressure and temptation to condemn and understand. Perhaps no one more eloquently stated the case than Anthony Eden who, in quite good French, advised the student of this period to beware of hasty judgments. Eden suggested that perhaps one had to live in a country that had been overrun by the enemy in order to feel how devastating such a blow can be to a nation. Yet this advice is not sufficient. Other countries shared a similar fate and did not collaborate to the same extent as France. As a member of the Tory establishment Eden must have been aware of enough fellow countrymen—besides Oswald Mosley—who sympathized in varying degrees with Hitler and who might have gone along with him under certain circumstances. In the France of 1940 the opportunities for illusions and delusions were abundant.

At the end of the film the moral vapidity of a certain type of artist was demonstrated by Maurice Chevalier who offered some feeble excuses for his wartime activities. He tried to cheer up his critics with an insipid song. But even here as with similar cases the whole story is

Chambrun's account of the 1940 debacle, see his *I Saw France Fall: Will She Rise Again?* (New York: Morrow, 1940). Having seen *The Great Dictator*, Chambrun said to Chaplin, "But of course your point of view is not to be taken seriously." (Chaplin, *My Autobiography*, p. 404).

⁴ Claude Lévy and Paul Tillard, *La Grande Rafle du Vel d'Hiv* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1967).

not made clear. Sacha Guitry, for example, was arrested for promoting theatrical productions in Europe and Germany. Through his connections, however, he saved many lives. Yet during his trial when he called out for witnesses to testify on his behalf, very few came forward. It is precisely this quality of the film—its double impulse to reflection and judgment, its infuriating ambiguity of presentation—that has enraged and aroused viewers. Despite its length, Ophuls has not and perhaps could not tell the entire story of France's collapse. One comes away from the film with a sense of having seen too many flawed specimens of humanity, too much of the apathetic and collaborationist, not enough of the solitary heroes often belonging to no group, who risked their lives and families to liberate France and preserve its honor.

In this documentary history of Clermont-Ferrand, Ophuls might have investigated in depth, for example, the unique case of its Bishop Piguët. The behavior of the Catholic church toward Vichy was not much better and perhaps worse than the rest of France, that is to say it generally supported the New Order with few noteworthy exceptions. Upon liberation some bishops were forced to retire for collaborationist activities and so devout a Catholic as Charles de Gaulle refused for such reasons to greet the archbishop of Paris in his cathedral. But Bishop Piguët, though a strong supporter of Pétain's policies, was arrested, beaten by the Gestapo and sent to Dachau.

Although this film has received the Grand Prize of the Dinard festival and an award from the National Society of Film Critics, it has also had its share of negative reviews. Its reception in France was predictably mixed. The communist and socialist parties, along with independent groups, gave it excellent reviews. But the miniscule though trendy Maoist faction denounced the film as being too balanced, too considerate of the enemy's viewpoint, in short a "social democratic" film. Jean-Paul Sartre, too, attacked the film for its curious ability to stir occasional laughter in dealing with so dismal a subject. But Ophuls dismissed Sartre as "a prisoner of pinheads." The forces of the extreme Right did not want to hear of any film made by someone of Ophuls' background. Ophuls summarizes their reaction to his work as: "Who the hell are you, buster? Nobody elected you."⁵

In America, Stanley Hoffmann, too, criticized the selective perception of the film's creator. Hoffmann felt that Ophuls was too close to

⁵ Interview with Ophuls, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Marcel Ophuls

the events portrayed to provide an objective study of the period. The director's voice is often provocative and betrays deep pain, but who else has bothered to make such a film? Perhaps only someone who did experience some of these events and does not wish to forget them can be so capable and so motivated. Hoffmann's background is similar to Ophuls' and he sympathizes with his sense of hurt yet berates him for singling out France and neglecting "all the Quislings and Oustachis."⁶ But this is precisely the point that Ophuls was trying to bring out: France in general went along rather obligingly with the occupation, and Pétain was not the equivalent of Quisling. And no great defense of liberty was expected from Croatia and other lands of that region. But France always prided itself on being unique, as the creator and defender of the principles of 1789. Betrayal of these ideals made its collaboration unique. This was the sorrow and the pity.

The most revealing criticism of the film came from conservative establishment circles. They, too, preferred that little be said about their role, and in some ways this reluctance is more significant than that of the extremists, since they represent so large a segment of society and mainly dominate contemporary politics. A case in point illustrates how easily former adversaries could work side by side. When Maurice Schumann was serving de Gaulle in London, Maurice Couve de Murville was serving Pétain in Vichy. In de Gaulle's last government both managed to work together. This effortless symbiosis may provide the key to understanding present government hostility to disquieting publicity like Ophuls', and it has implications of more direct and indirect values. In his detailed study on Vichy France, Robert Paxton remarked upon the skill by which a certain type of faceless functionary, often a technician with important training, managed to make the transition from occupation to liberation. To be sure, many Vichy supporters were punished and several were executed. But the emergence of the indispensable specialist, ready to serve any master, remains part of Vichy's legacy. What helped keep him in power was not just his talent but also the fear of turmoil resulting from his removal, "the fear of social disorder as the highest evil."⁷ At the time of liberation France's three

⁶ Stanley Hoffmann, "On the Sorrow and the Pity," *Commentary*, LIV (September, 1972), 75.

⁷ Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972), p. 382. Paxton concludes his study thus: "Indeed, it may be the German occupiers rather than the Vichy majority whom Americans, as residents of the most powerful state on earth, should scrutinize most unblinkingly." p. 383.

The Massachusetts Review

main political groupings agreed not to pursue far-reaching changes that might disturb the fabric of society. Today all factions officially and sincerely denounce the Vichy years, yet there remains the uncomfortable thought that they all bear responsibility for its creation. Whether it be the Vichy minted coins which are still in circulation or the Vichy planners on all levels who still serve the state, their existence serves as a reminder of the links binding France today to the France of 1940.

More importantly, Ophuls' film records too many people for whom Vichy was indistinguishable from any other government—average people for whom Hitler and Pétain easily appeared as acceptable norms. Of course, Pétain was no more a Hitler than Giraudoux was a Goebbels, but the former served the latter, however blindly, ambivalently, as partner in a fascist Europe. Citizen Pompidou, a son of the Auvergne, was content to prepare an anthology of poetry while the battle raged around him. His government, which could not bring itself to mention the centenary of the Paris Commune of 1871, was all the more reluctant to rekindle memories of more weighty and recent importance.