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From the Capitoline Hill to the Tarpeian Rock? Free French coming out of war

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ABSTRACT

This text explores the return of the Free French to metropolitan territory in 1944–45. The intense emotions provoked by rediscovering the soil of France and their compatriots were succeeded by more mixed and even bittersweet feelings. Very soon, dreams dreamed far away and for many years met the reality of a country deeply wounded by the defeat of 1940 and by the Occupation. The takeover of administrative and political power, and the beginnings of the purges, provoked clashes with the Allies and even more with the metropolitan Resistance, which were essentially quarrels of legitimacy. The violence of the fight for the Liberation mercilessly took its toll. Each and every person who had survived the conflict found the resumption of a personal and intimate life more difficult than expected. Finally, some of the hopes for renovation that had been developed throughout the war began to waver. This led to a frustration tinged with bitterness on which contrasting memories took root.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte évoque le retour des Français libres sur le territoire métropolitain en 1944–45. Aux émotions intenses provoquées par les retrouvailles avec le sol de France et avec les compatriotes, ont succédé des sentiments plus mitigés, voire doux-amers. Très vite, les rêves nourris au loin et des années durant se sont heurtés à la réalité d'un pays profondément meurtri par la défaite de 1940 et par l'Occupation. La prise en mains des rôles administratifs et politiques ainsi que les prémisses de l'épuration ont donné lieu à des heurts, quelquefois à des affrontements, avec les Alliés et, plus encore, avec la Résistance intérieure, c'est-à-dire à des querelles de légitimité. La violence des combats libérateurs a impitoyablement prélevé son dû. Pour chacune et chacun sur qui le conflit avait imprimé sa marque, la reprise d'une vie personnelle et intime s'est avérée plus difficile que prévu. Enfin, quelques-uns des espoirs de rénovation développés tout au long de la guerre ont commencé à faire long feu. Une certaine frustration teintée d'amertume en a découlé sur laquelle des mémoires contrastées ont pris racine.

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1. Introduction

Between 18 June 1940 and 31 July 1943,¹ some French women and men decided to leave the metropolitan territory or its direct dependencies in order to keep fighting elsewhere and otherwise, and hopefully to eventually come back home as victors.² These Free French formed a heterogeneous population. A majority were of French extraction, but there were also foreign combatants. Men were much more numerous than women, the latter being minors according to French law, which sometimes had an impact on their homecoming at the end of the war insofar as some felt that they had committed one additional transgression. All these people had joined general de Gaulle for various reasons.³ They belonged to the civil service, to fighting units and to secret services.⁴ Apart from the liberation of their country and the restoration of democracy and of the Republic, they did not always share the same objectives.

A certain number of these 'combatant exiles'⁵ disappeared in the furnace of the war. After June 1944, the survivors went back to France. This article primarily intends to analyse the first steps of this way back from exile, i.e. the first months and years of the Free French '*sortie de guerre*',⁶ which has been overlooked by historians.⁷ The ways, means and conditions of the return to the motherland and of the encounters that followed varied in nature and in timing. The combatants of French extraction landed with military units in Normandy or in Provence and fought their way back. For the foreigners who did not belong to the Foreign Legion and for whom a homeland still was accessible,⁸ the liberation of French soil was only a first step. It mattered whether public servants returned home from London or Algiers. London still was the place where everything had begun and from which the direct connexions with France were the least difficult. But, even if Algiers was a 'hornets' nest' according to many Free French of the very first hour, it was the place where the French provisional government was then established and thus where the most important decisions were taken. This is to say that some of the Free French who were still living and working in London had begun to face a feeling of abandonment even before returning to France.

After the traditional tales and pictures of jubilation, the first months and years of the Free French '*sortie de guerre*' turned out to be much more contrasted, and much less joyful or easy than expected. To explore these contrasted homecomings, we will highlight as much as possible the private and even intimate level.⁹ We will notably analyse the senses and the emotions experienced by the Free French, and thus make use of some of the concepts provided by the history of sensitivities and emotions.¹⁰ First and foremost, we will consider the notion of 'emotional community'¹¹ put forward by Barbara H. Rosenwein; we will suggest that the Free French and metropolitan resistance formed two different 'communities', and even that those who had remained in Occupied France without participating in any kind of resistance were a third one. We will also draw on Frank Biess's concept of 'emotional demobilization'¹² to explore some of the processes experienced by the Free French throughout their homecoming. Lastly, we will build upon William M. Reddy's notion of 'emotional regime'¹³ to describe what the Free French felt as a discrepancy between the broad atmosphere in liberated France and the actual behaviour of some of their fellow countrymen.

We will mainly rely on testimonies¹⁴ and memoirs, and even more on private writings such as personal letters, diaries and war journals.¹⁵ We have privileged the accounts of individuals who wrote regularly and extensively all through the war; these documents form

a primary material that allows the reader to follow closely the evolution of their authors' thoughts and feelings.

We will consider five successive steps. First, we will briefly address the expectations and questionings that went along with the ultimate period of the exile. Second, we will describe the first encounters with France and with the French, and the adjustments that immediately followed. Third, we will consider the bloody fighting of the liberation period and the strong rivalries between Free French, on the one hand, and interior resistance fighters, on the other. Fourth, we will ask whether resuming a 'normal' life was actually possible, or not, for the former exiles. Lastly, we will contrast the hopes nurtured by the Free French about their situation and the misunderstandings they faced when coming back home. All in all, we will propose an argument in which the narrative of triumph usually put forward by the Gaullist myth and by French popular memory is undermined by experiences of disappointment and disillusion.

2. Expectations and questionings

The prospect of homecoming raised anew interrogations about exile in the minds of the Free French. They found themselves asking a series of questions related to the fact of having long lived far away from home: what happened to my relatives during these years? How and where are they? What are they doing, thinking, feeling in this complicated period? How shall I find them when in France? And so on. It appears that these questions had been somewhat mitigated because of the tension related to the preparation of the liberation, because of the excitement of the last months. Now that the victory was certain, that it was time to go back home, they appeared again, very often much stronger than ever.¹⁶

In many cases, the Free French chose to begin by writing a letter. This was a requirement for the combatants who knew that they would not be allowed to leave their military units in order to meet family and friends. But it is striking to note that they often kept writing letters even after the first meeting, as if the written word were necessary to develop new relationships quietly and in a proper way. For the civil servants, writing an initial letter was not compulsory. Very often they chose to nevertheless. Numerous illustrations can be found among which, for example, is Pierre Denis' cautious approach. Having joined Free France in June 1940, Denis/*Rauzan* had been among the main people responsible for Free French finances. In late August 1944, as he still was in London but was preparing to go to France, he sent the same letter to 'all the members of his family'. In this document, he explained where he was and what he had done during the war; he announced that he was about to come back without further detail about his plans.¹⁷

This letter-writing emphasizes how much France was upside down.¹⁸ Knowing that people were scattered, that travelling would probably be complicated, that phone and telegraph might not work properly, the Free French in a way took precautions. Furthermore, their memory of their leaving for exile was still very much alive, that is, the memory of their separation from loved ones and sometimes of the transgressions that had gone hand in hand with this separation. In their letters, they aired their hopes but also, *mezza voce*, their fears of being unwelcome, of being disappointed, of possible unwanted discoveries, and so on.¹⁹ These fears are a very interesting feature. The Free French had moved mountains throughout the war and the decisions they had taken since the Fall of France had proven correct. At the time of their writing, they knew that they undoubtedly were victors. But

they were still afraid of what they would discover both in France and more specifically in their own homes. As a result, the exiles often took the decision to return without actually coming home: a letter was first sent as a sort of ambassador to announce, to inform and to explain; then, but only then, did its author appear in person.

3. First encounters and first adjustments

3.1. *The emotions of the arrival*

The intense feelings provoked by the discovery of the French soil and by first encounters with fellow countrymen were quickly followed by more mitigated, and even bittersweet, feelings. A very large majority of the first Free French to arrive in France were actual combatants in arms, mainly from the Second Armoured Division led by General Leclerc and from the First Motorized Infantry Division (MID)²⁰ headed by General Brosset. Most of them felt deep and strong emotions about being back in a country they had left long ago. These first feelings were mainly positive ones. For instance, Lieutenant Christian Girard, Leclerc's aide-de-camp, wrote:

The launch moves away from the boat and soon the coast can be clearly seen. I will not dwell on these minutes [...]. All around are boats, some at anchor, others sunk to form a breakwater, and through their uncertain silhouettes can be seen a long pink band and a few trees ... France.

I could not avert my gaze. These are things that one can't describe and they still surprise me.²¹

One of the main voices of the French broadcast 'Les Français parlent aux Français' and at this time a reporter embedded in the Second Armoured Division, Pierre Bourdan, noted:

That night, despite the sea air and the white mist that clung to the ground, we recognized the land of France from its smell. Even blindfolded, we would have identified it. Because the land of France can be recognized without fail from its smell; even more, perhaps, when one is coming from England where the countryside is washed, combed, glossy, polished by rain and wind, where it hides from the sense of smell, flees away from road to road, and leaves, with its adorned grace, the memory of an elusive presence.

Here, the earth seizes you bodily, surrounds you, grabs you with its scents and everything robust and moving that goes from it ...²²

Long after the war, François Jacob still remembered his arrival with passionate words:

This dark line, still uncertain, still blurred by blue mist, far away on the horizon, it is the coast of France. A line still unreal, as is unreal this moment, too long waited for, too much dreamed of, too much caressed. A moment of suffocation that mingles laughter with tears, when suddenly the actual experience reproduces what has been imagined. When what was unattainable a short while ago suddenly takes shape to fill more than what seemed possible, all at once erasing four years of exile, anguish, solitude, fighting, and despair. Four years coming to an end on this dark contour, already more sharply drawn on the horizon, more precise, slowly growing at the pace of the boat. The land of France! Promised land. Cognac. Paradise. Eldorado. [...] The incredible in the pure state. The marvellous in the rough, absolute, breath-taking (...).²³

Having landed in Provence in mid-August in the ranks of the 1st MID, Major Gabriel Brunet de Sairigné wrote:

Landed at night on a small beach that I knew well, I spent my first hours in France, lying in a pine forest. All my life, I will never forget that smell of pine and the sound of the wind in the needles. It made one weep! Life is beautiful!²⁴

One of the Free French of the very first hour and a member of the Provisional government, René Pleven²⁵ arrived in Paris on 31 August.²⁶ On 2 September, he wrote to his mother:

You can guess what are my feelings when finding myself back in this beloved France after four years and two months of separation. I came from Algiers to Dreux in a military aircraft and then from Dreux to Paris on the road. The smile of France, of the women and the children was an unforgettable reward for me!²⁷

After all that, not every returnee found him or herself in such a state of euphoria, or at least of emotion so intense that it became nearly indescribable. General Brosset wrote in his diary on 20 August 1944:

I rediscovered France with a very average emotion. Major Mirkin wept. I simply said ‘Hello’. My travels have not diminished my detachment. I have become more and more European. I used to be European out of taste, others would say out of prejudice. I am now European out of experience and by principle.

To think in French terms and to wish to find a French solution to the problems we will encounter is doomed to failure. The Anglo-Saxons will not tolerate a Europe under French domination. Besides, we no longer have the confidence in ourselves that would make this a possibility. One must think European if one does not want to think Anglo-Saxon. And Anglo-Saxon is first and foremost American. Today’s and recent experiences in matters of earnestness and leadership suggest that American authority is not pleasant. It is a familiar, rude and contemptuous.²⁸

Whether it was ‘average’ or intense, whether it took place in mid-June 1944, at the end of the following summer, in the autumn or even later, the emotion felt by the victors coming back from exile was no less real. The exhilaration of the return journey was quickly coupled, wrote François Jacob, with a ‘state of exaltation in which the sweetness of treading once again on a soil for long thought to be forever out of bonds mingled with the violence that had pushed (the Free French) into combat’. Furthermore, explained Jacob, ‘the emotion of suddenly understanding the meaning of the expression “native land” in every limb, in every muscle’ combined with ‘the rage of wanting to wash from this earth every morning of agony, all the nights of prison, all the days of anxiety and humiliation suffered for four years.’²⁹ Just as Pierre Bourdan recalled France’s smell³⁰ or Gabriel Brunet de Sairigné evoked the ‘smell of pine’ and the ‘sound of the wind’,³¹ so François Jacob’s words tell us about the return, and more broadly about exile and war, as a sensorial experience.³² These words also reveal how much the Free French were committed body, mind and soul to their fighting and to the great cause that underpinned it. They underline the virtual omnipresence of patriotism among the main reasons for joining Free France. These first pure joyful states of mind help to explain the rage mixed with a touch of humiliation that quickly arose with many former exiles when they did not feel completely masters in their own home. This notably happened when they experienced difficulties with the powerful Allies, pervasive liberators – the Americans in particular – who were rapidly felt to be a new kind of occupier.³³

3.2. Bittersweet first encounters with fellow countrymen

Meetings with fellow countrymen almost immediately followed the rediscovery of French soil. Again, feelings were often intense as François Jacob summarized: ‘The pariahs suddenly became heroes who had brought the dragon down.’³⁴

The so-called ‘heroes’ were duly celebrated and thus found themselves, for days and sometimes weeks, in the heart of a torrent of positive emotions. An excellent example is

given by the intense and dangerous 12-day journey accomplished by Pierre Bourdan and two of his friends in Brittany and in Anjou before meeting up again with the Second Armoured Division: having crossed the front line, they were taken prisoner by German soldiers, interrogated by the Gestapo and embarked on a train for Germany; they managed to escape from the train and were finally taken in by farmers who were related to the interior resistance.³⁵ An even better example is given by the pure joy and happiness of the apotheosis in Paris. Right after the liberation of the capital city, *Ce Soir* described Leclerc's men in these terms: 'They are tanned, exhausted and immensely happy. And on their rough cheeks, the tan almost disappears under the marks of lipstick.'³⁶

On 26 August, *Le Parisien libéré* depicted the situation in Paris as follows:

We know, of course, what a preponderant part the Americans took in the battle of France. But they wanted Paris to taste first the pure joy of a family celebration at which people meet up after a long separation.³⁷

Nevertheless, even in the most united families, once the initial and warm first moments had passed, the reception of the changed relative arriving from abroad could create serious difficulties. In other words, if in many places the first welcoming was delightful and sometimes delirious, the day-to-day reality on the ground quickly drew a much darker picture: the so-called 'heroes' soon realized that everything would not be that simple in newly found France. As early as 2 August, Christian Girard noted in his diary: 'We went through villages in ruins where we saw in passing some French and a few rare children.'³⁸

On 8 August, Major Repiton-Préneuf, head of intelligence within the Second Armoured Division headquarters, wrote about the arrival in Normandy of the division seven days previous:

The villages [...] presented weary facades. The inhabitants looked blankly at the monotonous line. Then there were no more villages; in the ruins and the orchards, where the strayed cattle gathered instinctively, there were fewer and fewer inhabitants.³⁹

Years after the war, General Georges Buis – at the time a captain – remembered:

The Battle of Normandy [...] for the division [...] was not an opportunity for a warm reunion with the population. The Norman compatriots seemed indifferent and often surly. Perhaps they had just seen too much. Among them, however, some individuals dedicated themselves spontaneously and earnestly.⁴⁰

Last but not least, the Free French belonged to huge Allied armies who partly had to live off a country that was emerging from four harsh years of occupation. That is to say that the former exiles also encountered fellow countrymen who were struggling and trying to survive in a terrible situation. They faced the pettiness – sometimes the hostility – of some, notably farmers, who made them pay for parking, gasoline, water, a barn for the night. They had to stop some attempts of 'wild purging' instead of a proper trial. They met individuals living in the fear of retaliation, of justice – especially of mob justice. This was not the best context in which to (re)establish trustful and peaceful relationships.

4. Rivalries and bloody fighting

4.1. *Getting along with the interior resistance*

For the Free French, the first weeks and months in France were also a time of powerful rivalries and bloody fighting. Taking control of administrative and political structures,

and of the outbreaks of purging, led to clashes with the interior resistance⁴¹ and, to a lesser extent, with the Allies. First of all, the former exiles had to get along with the members of the 'army of shadows', i.e. the long-time committed resistance fighters,⁴² and also with the 'last-hour' combatants whose behaviour was often unpredictable and sometimes unacceptable. In other words, on top of dealing with difficult issues such as food supply, housing and hygiene, the new local authorities – coming either from the Free French Forces or from the metropolitan resistance movements and networks – had to control the activity of people who were all the more active for having stayed put during the dark years. They also had to make sure that more and more French individuals would participate in the military fighting for the liberation of France. The issue concerned the French Forces of the Interior (FFI) and the Francs-Tireurs and partisans (FTP), whose energies had to be channelled and distracted from the conquest of power. Since it was not possible to restore conscription in a chaotic France, a sort of artisanal *levée en masse* had to be implemented to expand and then to reinforce the new French Army.

Having to deal with such complicated issues did not at all facilitate the first contacts between the Free French and the leaders of the interior resistance. A good illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the clashes between General Brosset and Yves Farge in Lyon in September about the distribution of powers between the army commander and the commissioner of the republic.⁴³ Another and contrasted illustration is given by Pierre de Chevigné's action in summer 1944. As military commander of the liberated territories, and along with Normandy regional commissioner François Coulet, Chevigné had to contribute to the restoration of law and order,⁴⁴ to take control of and to manage the military installations in order to put them in the service of the Allied command, and, in connection with the leaders of the interior resistance, to integrate the FFI and the FTP into the new French Army. General Jean Delmas, at the time a young FFI, still favourably remembered Pierre de Chevigné when he first met him in July 1944 as a very impressive French colonel, as a man whom he would have followed anywhere.⁴⁵ But other interior resistance fighters were sometimes surprised, and even shocked, by the imperious self-confidence of the Free French officer. They thought that the young⁴⁶ colonel was giving orders to everybody without listening to anyone and anything at all, and that he did not take the statuses and the positions in the interior resistance into account. They considered that he had neither the slightest idea of nor any respect for what the fighting in the ranks of the 'army of shadows' had really been during the dark years in France.⁴⁷ And they did not like it at all.

Hence a form of more or less silent struggle began between the Free French and some leaders of the interior resistance. Firstly, this struggle was underpinned by a series of cultural misunderstandings. Pierre de Chevigné and some of the Free French acted as *actual* officers in front of other ones who belonged to the secret army. Moreover, the combatants of the two French resistances – the interior and the external ones – had not fought the same war and did not use the same ways and means of fighting. More deeply, two emotional communities⁴⁸ happened to be in opposition to each other: on the one hand, that of the Free French who had officially joined the resistance, who had experienced the exhilaration of adventure outside France but also the hardships of exile and the longing for the motherland, who had fought far away and in broad daylight, and who were coming back as victors within the Allied armies; on the other, the community formed by the 'foot-soldiers of glory'⁴⁹ who had committed themselves secretly to the resistance, who had improvised their ways and means of fighting, who had experienced day-to-day fear, repression and sometimes treason, but

also the intense friendship born in the army of shadows, the 'philia' described by Jean-Pierre Vernant.⁵⁰ Secondly, the old debate about legitimacy was being put forward again: who was the most legitimate to lead the French resistance? More broadly, the Free French had to share with the interior resistance fighters the intoxicating idea of forming a clear-headed elite, heir to France's greatness and protector of the homeland's highest interests, responsible for the future reform of the country. In fact, the question at issue was who deserved the most from the motherland and thus who would rightfully exercise responsibilities in liberated France.

4.2. Fighting again and again

On another note, for the women and men in military uniform, being in France meant fighting again and, worse, suffering severe losses among long-time brothers in arms.⁵¹ In Normandy and up to Paris, Leclerc's Second Armoured Division managed to keep fighting a kind of 'war of armed bands' even if integrated into the vast Allied armies and thus having to strictly follow orders.⁵² Then, as it progressed eastward, the division discovered what the expression 'total war' actually meant on the field: fighting in inhabited places, among civilians who happened to be fellow countrymen, possibly massive destructions, terrible combats and heavy losses to conquer some small pieces of land, and so on, all things that they had rarely experienced in Africa.

The 1st MID landed in Provence on 16 August 1944 as part of General de Lattre de Tassigny's 'B' Army and then fought towards Toulon, Lyon,⁵³ the Vosges, Belfort, Strasbourg, Colmar and finally the Alps. For its combatants, fighting in France first meant returning to the ranks in a French Army which was being rebuilt and under a high command that they found difficult to accept, and even sometimes to respect.⁵⁴ It also meant struggling⁵⁵ to integrate the former FFI and FTP, i.e. mostly young recruits without real combat experience and who sometimes were shocked by the capricious but well-disciplined Free French warriors, old fighters who felt absolutely legitimate because they belonged to the very pioneers of Free France. Just as it welcomed the FFI and the FTP, the 1st MID lost its 6000 African soldiers and its 275 combatants from Oceania,⁵⁶ a process that was part of the so-called 'whitewashing'⁵⁷ of the French Army. Moving out and replacing a third of the division inflicted a tough blow on the strong brotherhood in arms that had been created in the military camps and on the battlefields of Eastern and Northern Africa, of the Middle East and of Italy.⁵⁸ More broadly, the MID had become no more than one division among others within the Allied armies.⁵⁹ It faced a new form of violence and it suffered heavy losses: at the end of the campaign in France, it would have lost 5000 men.⁶⁰ Last but not least, this pure Free French unit had to forget its origins: if imagination, boldness and even insolence still had their place within the division, they nevertheless had to be curbed. It was paradoxical as these features and the initial refusal to obey a power considered as illegitimate had precisely brought victory. All in all, the campaign in France turned out to be a harsh trial.

5. A 'normal' life?

5.1. What personal life?

Another challenge, and not the least, arose for the Free French – indeed as for all combatants at war's end: that of the return to personal, private and intimate life. *De facto*, for each and

every one on whom the conflict had left its mark, the resumption of a personal life proved difficult. As soon as they could, the former exiles endeavoured to find a way to meet again in person with their relatives. It was rather difficult for the NCOs and for ordinary soldiers who, of course, could not leave their units. But like General Brosset, majors Brunet de Sairigné and Mirkin, and many others, their officers managed to do it. As soon as 2 August 1944, Lieutenant Girard noted about General Leclerc: ‘Tonight, the General went to have dinner with some cousins of his.’⁶¹

Considering all that Leclerc had to take care of right after his landing in Normandy and just before a military campaign against a still very tough enemy, his decision to have such a dinner is telling. Another meaningful illustration is given by Pierre de Chevigné. From 5 to 9 October 1944, and even if he still was at this time military commander of the territories recently liberated in Eastern France, he managed to make a quick round trip to the South-West of France where his two young daughters had been living with their paternal grandparents⁶² since June 1940.⁶³ Obviously, the civilians among the Free French had the same reflex. As soon as in Paris, René Pleven endeavoured to meet the members of his family who lived in the city; then he went to Brittany to meet cousins. For his part, when he arrived in the French capital city on 28 September 1944, Pierre Denis did not go to his apartment, where his son and his son-in-law were settled. He first paid a visit to his beloved sister Madeleine to take the temperature, so to speak, as if the situation needed to be assessed with someone benevolent and whom he could trust wholeheartedly. Then he went to Rauzan, his place in the province,⁶⁴ in order to meet his wife, children and grandchildren. Later, he would describe these encounters with the words ‘curiosity’ and ‘anxiety.’⁶⁵

Eventually, the former exiles had to break with the warm comradeship of their brothers in arms that they had enjoyed throughout the conflict. They returned home to resume their role as husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter. They all had to re-familiarize themselves with the rhythms and sensations of peacetime, to reintegrate into old friendly and social networks. For the servicemen, the extreme tension of combat evaporated, giving way to an intense physical, psychological and emotional relaxation. This process is well illustrated by Jean de Pange’s testimony. An ‘ace’ from the ‘Normandie-Niemen’ air regiment that had fought side-by-side with the Soviets, he flew back to France at the controls of a Fieseler-Storch that had been taken from the Germans. He landed in Issy-les-Moulineaux and:

I park (the plane) with care and, with slow gestures, one last time, I cut the contact, I close the fuel injector, I pull the flaps up, I put the brakes on and, for the first time since my childhood, I begin to cry ...⁶⁶

Such a testimony confirms the notion of emotional demobilization.⁶⁷ As with the process of cultural demobilization,⁶⁸ some norms and intimate mechanisms, in that case emotional ones, which had been created when joining Free France and which had been kept alive all during the war, suddenly had to be abandoned. This did not happen without difficulty, even suffering. Each and every soldier about to be demobilized experienced an emotional challenge. For the Free French nevertheless, the task proved all the more difficult because the stakes had been high and the emotional mobilization related to exile had been continuously intense. In the longer term, these new veterans had to break with the omnipresent fear provoked by living in wartime and by fighting, to bear the possible consequences of traumatic experience, to recover from having dealt with or witnessed death, to begin to mourn and, in some cases, to cope with the survivor’s guilt.⁶⁹ On top of everything, these people had to face a specific challenge: that of coming back from *exile*. Their relatives’ lives

had progressed through events that they did not know at all; even if completely normal, such a phenomenon was not always easy to take into account: he or she who was coming back sometimes tended to consider that these relatives' lives had almost stopped when he or she had left. When far away, the exiles had lived with memories of the loved ones, sometimes embellished, that had nothing in common with the reality that they found. Furthermore, some of them could not help thinking that their relatives should have committed themselves to the fighting. Such an idea gave birth to disillusion, even to bitterness. On the relatives' side, it nurtured a form of irritation against someone who appeared to have been right from the very beginning and against everybody, and who tended to strongly remind them of this. For example, when being asked about his homecoming and told that he probably had been much celebrated, the companion of the Liberation⁷⁰ André Verrier answered: 'Not really, there was not much to say. One should not blame them, you know, they had done nothing.'⁷¹

For his part, Pierre Denis wrote later on a bittersweet tone: 'Is there none of my readers who would have liked to know whether, more fortunate than Ulysses, I was recognized and welcomed by someone other than my dog?''⁷²

In their novel *The Return of the Insolent*, which was very much based on true stories and was written between January 1944 and February 1945, André Linné and Pierre Bonaventure explained:

Gabrielle⁷³ tries to explain the Free French to those people⁷⁴ who have no idea of it. Faced with their hostility, which their politeness scarcely conceals, she has the strange impression that she must plead for her comrades, that their acts need to be justified.⁷⁵

Furthermore, for many of those who had decided to leave and join Free France, exile had meant discovering new horizons, new people, new ways of life. Thus, beginning to live again with presumed 'close' relatives in presumed 'familiar' places was not easy.

5.2. What student or professional life?

Whatever their hopes of benefiting from the victory to change their lives, most of the former Free French resumed their academic or professional activities. After making a principle of disobedience, after having embodied rebellion and having held aloft the 'Free French spirit',⁷⁶ they had to accommodate themselves again to the framework of strict legality and to return to the ranks. The problem then was that few measures were taken to help them. Most of the students had to take all their exams, while the experience that they had acquired during the war was rarely taken into account. Such was, for example, the case of François Jacob. A student in medicine, he had joined Free France in June 1940. He had fought in Libya and Tunisia. Belonging to the Second Armoured Division, he had been very seriously wounded in Normandy. His injuries healed, he faced insuperable difficulties in having his experience as a medic on the battlefield valued by the Faculty of Medicine, which had consequences for his future professional life.⁷⁷ Another good illustration is given by Philippe Sassoon. A dentist in Beirut, he joined the Free French Forces in June 1941. Even if, like Jacob, a member of the prestigious Order of the Liberation, he had to take again all his exams in Paris after the Liberation.⁷⁸

In the professional field, the Free French 'came far below on the list of priorities behind the former POWs, the deportees, and the FFI'. In the civil service, they had to fight against the hostility of the Communists. Even worse, the wounded and the disabled were left to get by themselves, sometimes on the verge of begging.⁷⁹ Thus, Louis Gouriou remembered:

Some comrades who had not worked before the war had big problems. No organization to help the Free French Forces reintegrate themselves into civilian life. I have known two comrades who had become hobos ‘sponging’ off their families.⁸⁰

More broadly, after having crossed paths in Free France with figures whom they very likely would have never met in other circumstances, and thus after having evolved intellectually, culturally and politically through contact with these figures, many of these veterans had to face up to the discrepancy between old ideas and new convictions. Those who escaped, or at least managed to deal with, this dilemma had to come to terms with a world in which they no longer had to fight day in day out for what they considered to be fundamental values. As historians, we have to take into account the idea that the best-known stories very often are the most difficult ones.⁸¹ We also have to weigh the fact that after the war some former Free French quickly started wondering why they should live such a boring life after having been through so much, and thus did not struggle much to reintegrate themselves. We can nevertheless consider Arnaud Langer’s remark: ‘We felt both out of phase and down-graded.’⁸²

This is even more significant because Langer was a member of the Order of the Liberation and an officer in the Air Corps during and after the war. Things turned out to be probably more complicated for the foreign members of Free France who, like the Spaniards of the Second Armoured Division, could not go back to their country and thus had to rebuild everything in a victorious but broken and not always very welcoming country. Last but not least and far from any idea of ‘normality’, some Free French persisted in their practices born from the war as if nothing had changed. Let us consider, for example, the former aviators of the Free French Flying Forces transformed into a taxi team that Romain Gary evoked in his 1967 short story *Ten Years After or the Oldest History of the World*.⁸³

6. Hopes, misunderstandings and disillusiones

6.1. *Disappointing France and French*

Very soon, fantasies dreamed far away and for many years collided with the reality of a country deeply wounded by the defeat of 1940 and by the Occupation years. After the first few weeks, those who saw France again, a country actually turned upside down, torn and traumatized by the war, were confronted with the fatigue and the weariness of their fellow countrymen. The former exiles were all the more upset since their compatriots tended to think that the conflict was over and to consider livelihood as their main concern. Even so, the war was still on, notably for the Free French belonging to military units. Thus, the newcomers began to think that ‘there (was) not much changed’⁸⁴ in a France where the rich and the resourceful remained numerous. There was some condescension, and sometimes a deep disgust towards fellow countrymen who, in the eyes of the Free French, had not dared to carry on the fight, had even collaborated with the enemy or had indulged in the ‘wild purge’. In this regard, Alexis Le Gall recalled:

We were surprised and disappointed with 1944–1945 France. A sloppy France, without morality, without ideal, a France of schemes and of black market. We were idealists. They were former occupied, former exploited, undernourished ...⁸⁵

Another good example is given by Diego Brosset in his diary on 3 November 1944:

A phenomenon of discrepancy of extraordinary magnitude between us who, for four years, dreamed of victory and those who, for four years, have agreed to accept defeat. A shameless

exaggeration of a resistance that was in fact exceptional. And there are the atrocious greed of the peasants, the shameful fear of mobilization among most people, the ungrateful hostility towards the Allies, the criminal indulgence vis-à-vis the Germans ...”⁸⁶

In other words, the Free French were shocked by what they considered to be the insincerity of many of their fellow countrymen: beyond the joyful and festive emotional regime⁸⁷ that went along with the Liberation, pettiness, jealousy and even greed reappeared. More broadly, the former exiles had trouble explaining the hardships they had endured during the war as they found themselves in a country and among fellow countrymen who had also suffered deeply from the consequences of the conflict. In other words, there was a huge gap in terms of moral economy of suffering. Once again, two emotional communities confronted each other: on the one side, those who had experienced the fight, the glory and the satisfaction of having been fully right; on the other, those who had endured the Occupation and its miseries, sometimes the rage of having been mistaken and perhaps of being told so by an ‘insolent’ follower of de Gaulle.

6.2. *Insufficient gratitude*

Moreover, considering the context of the immediate after-Liberation and of the end of the 1940s, the Free French were often not celebrated as much and as well as they had thought they would – and should – be. They resented it all the more since they had been very well treated in exile and since, at the very beginning of their being in France again, they had sometimes received better treatment from the government than the former interior resistance fighters. A good illustration of this phenomenon is given by the moral economy of gratitude⁸⁸ from which the First Motorized Infantry Division benefited. Its soldiers received 376 or 36% of the crosses of the Order of the Liberation – the ultimate Free French chivalry – awarded to individuals from November 1940 to 23 January 1946.⁸⁹ That said, the division was given a rather banal position during the liberation period: it liberated Lyon rather than Paris ‘given’ to the Second Armoured Division; it was sent not to Germany but to some remote fighting in the Alps. Its participation in the victory celebration in Paris on 18 June 1945 was symbolic: the MID was represented only by a detachment located at the rear of the military parade; next to this detachment marched one from a newly formed division.

This truncated glorification provoked a deep bitterness among combatants who considered that they had been the most authentic resistance fighters, that they were deprived of ‘their’ victory, and that their country was only able to celebrate people whom they considered to be less heroic than themselves, the FFI and, worse, the POWs.⁹⁰ Such ideas and feelings appear to be excessive. But it is true that the former Free French were not celebrated as much and as well as the 1914–18 veterans had been. Things were made even worse by the fact that both the two great Free French units were disbanded quickly after the end of the war: the 1st MID on 15 August 1945 and the Second Armoured Division on 31 March 1946.

6.3. *Hopes, projects and disillusionions*

Last but not least, some of the hopes conceived and kept alive all during the war quickly began to fizzle out. Former Free French endeavoured to make use of the political, economic and social programmes they had conceived during the war, to give life to the values and to the ideals for which they had risked so much, or at least to ensure that they would not sink

into oblivion. A good illustration is given by the message that General Brosset sent in the name of his division to the Provisional consultative assembly in Algiers on 7 November 1943⁹¹ to tell it about his men's expectations for their to-be liberated country. That was a singular move for a general in Republican France where *arma cedant togae* and thus the army obeys without discussion.⁹²

More broadly, at the end of the war many former Free French joined political parties created *ex nihilo* such as the Popular Republican Movement or the Democratic and Socialist Union of the Resistance, or old ones that they hoped to renew. A few participated in governments. The latter process began in early November 1943 with the first reshuffling of the French Committee for National Liberation, a genuine provisional government *avant la lettre* in Algiers: under the presidency of General de Gaulle, the interior resistance fighters and the Free French made up a crushing majority. The same was true of the Provisional Government of the French Republic (PGFR) both at its creation (3 June 1944) and subsequent to its first reshuffle (3 September 1944). The trend was not reversed after General de Gaulle had left power in January 1946. But, little by little, the former exiles were forced to notice that some of the hopes and projects that had been born during the war were watered down or reduced. In other words, the Free French wish for reform was in some ways frustrated. The disillusion that ensued was even more important since the hopes and the aspirations had been very high.

7. Conclusion

It is well known that at the end of a conflict, former combatants very often feel unconventional, ill at ease. For the Free French, the Liberation period and the months and years that immediately followed were even more complicated by the fact that they had to give up the companionship and daily sharing which had distinguished their engagement and which had been strengthened by the experience of exile. In a word, they had to say goodbye to a long-time and remote struggle to which they had given themselves body and soul, and from which they emerged as victors.

In liberated France, the former exiles had to acknowledge that they were only a minority within the minority that had said 'no' to defeat and armistice. They also had to abandon the exhilarating idea of being a unique elite bearing the seeds of the future renewal of France. One might even think that in a deeply wounded country which aspired to rebuild itself peacefully, the Free French were sometimes resented as too uncompromising, or even as the spoilsport of the system.

For these reasons, many tried to find compensation. Some of them went abroad or to the colonies in order to start new lives. Others stayed in the army and went to Indochina. The happy few gathered within the Order of the Liberation that discreetly endeavoured to shelter the 'remembrance, the loyalty and the friendship'.⁹³ The majority withdrew into a vast number of associations in which they would again be within their 'true' family. There, they would discuss and highlight their very specific fighting experience, talk about the hardships they had endured, and above all make live the comradeship created under the tricolour flag adorned by a Lorraine Cross. They would bring to life the memory of departed brothers in arms. They would preserve Free France's 'non-transmissible heritage'⁹⁴ and, more broadly, the Free French spirit: an open mind, a strong contempt for conventions and conformism, an even stronger voluntarism and, last but not least, the ability to say 'no'. This is to say that

in these associations, they maintained alive the memory of the moral economy of combatant exile and of the emotional community created in and by Free France.

In the end, the initial joy was mixed with bitter and sometimes painful feelings. The behaviour was less exuberant, the triumph less resounding, the 'brass bands' more quickly 'dissolved'⁹⁵ than a certain heroic vulgate asserts it. Such an acknowledgement does not mean that some of the former Free French did not accomplish remarkable, and even sometimes outstanding, professional and social trajectories.⁹⁶ This might be the last paradox of a decidedly very interesting cohort.

Notes

1. Official date of the merger with the French Army in North Africa under general Giraud's command. The Free French were then disbanded in favour of the Fighting French Forces, i.e. the French Committee for National Liberation's Army. In other words, the Free French will be considered in this article as they were defined in the document issued on 29 July 1953 by the French Ministry of the Armed Forces – See Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 26.
2. In other words, the members of Free France's committees in the world won't be considered hereafter – those for whom the notion of homecoming in metropolitan France does not make sense – nor the soldiers of the colonial troops whose homecoming took place in their original colonies on routes that did not necessarily pass by the hexagon – which also was a source of disillusion – and according to specific temporalities.
3. Piketty, "Combatant Exile during World War II."
4. About these characteristics, see notably Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 26–37.
5. Piketty, "Exilés Combattants."
6. On the notion of 'sortie de guerre' applied to the Second World War, see, for example: Bessel and Schumann, *Life after Death*; Bessel, *Germany 1945*; Biess and Moeller, *Histories of the Aftermath*; Cabanes and Piketty, "Sortir de la guerre;" Cohen, *In War's Wake*; Lowe, *Savage Continent*; Shephard, *The Long Road Home*.
7. It is, for example, striking that Crémieux-Brilhac's remarkable *La France Libre. De l'Appel du 18 juin à la Libération* ends on 26 August 1944.
8. This was not always the case. Let us consider, for example, the Spaniards of the Second Armoured Division: as former members of the Spanish republican armies, they knew that any homecoming was impossible for them. See, for example, Piketty, "Combatant Exile during World War II."
9. On that still rather new, and very promising, topic, see for example Biess, *Homecomings*; Cabanes and Piketty, *Retour à l'intime au sortir de la guerre*; Fishman, *We Will Wait*; Grossmann, *Jews, Germans and Allies*; Moore and Hatley-Broad, *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace*; Piketty, *Résister*; Piketty, "Retour à l'intime;" Zahra, *The Lost Children*.
10. For our particular topic, see first and foremost Biess, "Feelings in the Aftermath." More broadly, see Bourke, "Fear and Anxiety;" Bourke, *Fear. A Cultural History*; Corbin, *Le village des cannibales*; Febvre, "La sensibilité et l'histoire. Comment reconstituer la vie affective d'autrefois?"; "Forum: History of Emotions;" Frevert, *Emotions in History – Lost and Found*; Plamper, "The History of Emotions;" Plamper, *The History of Emotions*; Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*; Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History;" Rosenwein, "Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions;" Stearns and Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards."
11. "Emotional communities [...] are precisely the same as social communities – families, neighbourhoods, parliaments, guilds, monasteries, parish church memberships – but the researcher looking at them seeks above all to uncover systems of feeling: what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations that they make about others' emotions; the nature of the affective bonds

- between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore” – Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” 842.
12. Biess, “Feelings in the Aftermath,” 30–3.
 13. ‘Any enduring political regime must establish as an essential element a normative order for emotions, an “emotional regime”. Such emotional regimes can be placed, in a preliminary way, on a spectrum. At one extreme are strict regimes which require individuals to express normative emotions and to avoid deviant emotions. In these regimes, a limited number of emotions are modelled through ceremony or official art forms. Individuals are required to utter these emotives in appropriate circumstances, in the expectation that normative emotions will be enhanced and habituated. [...] At the other end of the spectrum are regimes that use such strict emotional discipline only in certain institutions (armies, schools, priesthoods) or only at certain times of the year or certain stages of the life cycle. These regimes set few limits on emotional navigation outside these restricted domains’ – Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 124–5.
 14. As much as possible written or given when the return took place. A good example is given by Bourdan, *Carnet de retour avec la division Leclerc*, introduction by Guillaume Piketty.
 15. See, for example, Piketty, *Français en résistance*; Piketty, *Résister*.
 16. See, for example, Bourdan, *Carnet de retour*, 36; Gabriel Brunet de Sairigné’s letter to his parents, 16 August 1944 in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 520; Girard, *Journal de Guerre 1939–1945*, 271; Jacob, *La statue intérieure*, 195–8.
 17. Oulmont, *Pierre Denis*, 369–70.
 18. For a sensitive evocation of the situation that the Free French discovered, see René Plevén’s letters to his wife Annette, then in the United States – René Plevén, “Correspondance (1939–1945)” in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 1085–91.
 19. See for example Guy Hattu’s letter to his mother, July 1944 in Hattu, *Un matin à Ouistreham, 6 juin 1944*, 216–20.
 20. Also known as the ‘1st Free French Division’. Formed on 1 February 1943 in Libya, it was initially composed of 7000 men, all Free French of the very first hour who had fought in Eritrea, Syria, Egypt and Libya. On 1 August 1943, General Diego Brosset took charge of the division. He, too, was a pioneer of Free France. After a great deal of training and the integration of former fighters from the interior resistance and former soldiers of the French Army in Africa, it reached 18,000 men. Engaged in Italy in April 1944, the division fought from Naples to Tuscany via Rome. It landed in Provence in mid-August 1944.
 21. Girard, *Journal de Guerre*, 244–5.
 22. Bourdan, *Carnet de retour*, 29.
 23. Jacob, *La statue intérieure*, 123.
 24. Gabriel Brunet de Sairigné’s letter to his parents, 16 August 1944 in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 520.
 25. He then was Secretary for the Colonies.
 26. Bougeard, *René Plevén*, 31.
 27. Personal archives of Mrs Françoise Andlauer, René Plevén’s daughter.
 28. Diary of Diego Brosset, 20 August 1944, in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 383, 385.
 29. Jacob, *La statue intérieure*, 125.
 30. See n. 22.
 31. See n. 24.
 32. About this, see, for example, the remarkable book written by Mark Smith on the US Civil War: *The Smell of Battle*. And more broadly Smith, *Sensing the Past*.
 33. See, for example, General Brosset’s aforementioned words (n. 28). Or, on a different point of view, Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*.
 34. Jacob, *La statue intérieure*, 123.
 35. Bourdan, *Carnet de retour*, 65–152.
 36. Quoted in Roberts, “Photographier les G.I.,” 269.
 37. Quoted in Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 269.
 38. Girard, *Journal de Guerre*, 246.

39. Repiton-Préneuf, *2ème DB. La Campagne de France*, 4.
40. Buis, "Presentation," XI-XLVI in Paul Repiton-Préneuf, *2ème DB. La Campagne de France*, XXXVI.
41. Which, soon, would face the same process of '*sortie de guerre*'. See Piketty, "De l'ombre au grand jour," 149–63.
42. Whose number had progressively grown to some 200,000 at the beginning of 1944 – See Marcot, "Combien étaient-ils ?," 339–42.
43. See for example Diary of Diego Brosset, 6 and 11 September 1944, in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 391–4. See also Farge, *Rebelles, soldats et citoyens*, 201–11.
44. He was notably in charge of the Police and the Gendarmerie, martial law, imprisonments and judgments.
45. Interview with Professor Philippe Vial, whom I thank here for lending me his notes.
46. He was 35 years old.
47. See, for example, the letter from George Boris to Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie dated 22 August 1944 – AN F/1a/3716.
48. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," 842.
49. Brossolette, "Saluez-les, Français !" in Brossolette *Résistance (1927–1943)*, 131–4.
50. Vernant, *Entre mythe et politique*, 26–7.
51. For a broad picture of these losses and a comparison with those of the Allies and of the interior resistance, see, notably Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 279–88.
52. Buis, "Presentation," XXXVII.
53. Conquered on 3 September.
54. In the eyes of the combatants of the 1st MID, some of these officers were too Old School to be able to adapt themselves to the new methods of warfare.
55. See, for example, Diary of Diego Brosset, 14 September 1944, in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 394–5.
56. About the so-called 'blanchiment'/'whitewashing' process, see, for example, Martel, *Histoire militaire de la France. 4. De 1940 à nos jours*, notably 124–5. On the specific case of the 1st MID, see Gras, *La 1ère DFL. Les Français libres au combat*, 352–8.
57. 'Blanchiment'.
58. See Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 281–2.
59. See, for example, the "Rapport du général Brosset, commandant la 1^{ère} DFL, sur le moral des troupes en ligne" en date du 3 novembre 1944, in De Lattre de Tassigny, *Reconquérir 1944–1945*, 68–71.
60. Killed in action, wounded in action, missing in action, or from sanitary evacuation. About all of this, see Gras, *La 1ère DFL*; Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 277–8; Saint Hillier, Bernard (Général), *Les Premiers soldats du général de Gaulle*.
61. Girard, *Journal de Guerre*, 246.
62. When he rallied General de Gaulle in June 1940, Pierre de Chevigné was a young widower.
63. Rapport de Pierre de Chevigné sur la situation dans le département des Basses-Pyrénées, 11 octobre 1944 – Service Historique de la Défense. Série P. 1940–1946. Tome I. Vichy, Londres, Alger, Paris. Dossier 2 "Rapports et correspondances expédiés par le détachement Chevigné mars – octobre 1944". Sous-dossiers "Basses-Pyrénées."
64. Of which he had taken the name as a pseudonym when becoming a Free French.
65. Quoted in Oulmont, *Pierre Denis*, 369.
66. De Pange, *Nous en avons tant vu ... 1940–1945*, 328.
67. Biess, "Feelings in the Aftermath," 30–3.
68. See Horne, "Introduction," 45–53 in Horne, "Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre," dossier in 14–18. *Aujourd'hui. Today. Heute*.
69. About some of these issues, see for example Delaporte, "Traumatismes psychiques" and Marquis, "Troubles psychiques (en sortie de guerre)."
70. The Cross of the Liberation was created in November 1940 by General de Gaulle to reward the most meritorious among those who had joined the fighting to liberate France. In total,

only 1038 individuals were made ‘companions of the Liberation’, i.e. members of the Order or the Liberation. See, for example, Piketty and Trouplin, *Les compagnons de l’aube*.

71. Quoted in André Verrier’s obituary published in *Ouest-France* soon after the latter’s death (29 December 2013).
72. Oulmont, *Pierre Denis*, 371.
73. She belonged to the 1st MDI.
74. Old friends from before the Free French adventure. She would face the same discrepancy with her husband, whom she would quickly leave.
75. Linné et Bonaventure, *Le retour des insolents*, 254.
76. Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre*, 95–101.
77. Jacob, *La statue intérieure*, 201–3, 207–8, 214–22 and 230–8.
78. Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 301–2.
79. Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 301.
80. Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 301.
81. A typical ‘source effect’.
82. Françoise Andlauer’s testimony to the author, 6 November 2012.
83. Gary, *L’Orage*.
84. Diary of Diego Brosset, 14 September 1944, in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 394–5. See also 687–9 in the same volume for General Leclerc’s letter to René Pleven dated 23 October 1944. For a recurrent illustration, see also *Caravane*, the journal of the Second Armoured Division, which was created in the autumn of 1944.
85. Quoted in Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 297.
86. Diary of Diego Brosset, 3 November 1944, in Piketty, *Français en résistance*, 408.
87. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 124–5. For a discussion of the concept or ‘emotional regime’, see, for example, Plamper, “The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns.”
88. See, for example, Piketty, “Reconnaissance, économie morale de la.”
89. See notably Piketty and Trouplin, *Les compagnons de l’aube*.
90. These considerations can be found in many testimonies given and memoirs written by Free French.
91. Diego Brosset, “Message adressé à l’Assemblée consultative de la France combattante,” 7 novembre 1943. Archives of the Brosset family.
92. Hence nicknamed the “Grande Muette.”
93. Gary, *La promesse de l’aube*, 443.
94. Cordier, Crémieux-Brilhac, and Thibaud, “La France libre, un héritage intransmissible?”
95. With reference to the inspiring title of Buis’s book: *Les fanfares perdues*. Entretiens avec Jean Lacouture, Paris, Seuil, 1975.
96. See Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 303–34.

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