

—AUTHOR'S NOTE—

There is no simple history of the Resistance in France during World War II. That's because resistance took many forms. There were well-organized secret paramilitary groups (who didn't always work together, and often disagreed about strategy); there were the Maquis, who were much more casually structured and often used guerrilla tactics; and finally, there were ordinary people who took action where they could to oppose the puppet Vichy government and the German occupiers.

This last group, perhaps, would be described as part of a resistance movement, rather than as members of "the Resistance." But all risked their lives, putting themselves—and perhaps others—in danger, and were crucial in the fight to liberate France.

Looking back, it may be easy to say that the only right action was to resist the German invaders, and to condemn those who didn't. But the definitions of who was a collaborator and who was a resistor are not so clear-cut. If a farmer made a big profit by selling to the Germans rather than to his hungry neighbors, he might have been considered a collaborator. After all, he was working with and helping the Germans. But this same farmer may also have been hiding forbidden radios, newspapers, or even Resistance fighters—putting his own life in danger.



And Resistance operatives, as brave as they were, weren't saints. They could be petty, vindictive, and sometimes used the Resistance as an excuse to steal or fight. Complicating things further, conditions in France were always changing. How French people felt and what they believed in 1940 were not necessarily the same in 1944.

History as written has a way of seeming clear, even inevitable. Yes, there may be different versions of "the truth," but there are definite winners and losers, friends and enemies, loyalties and betrayals.

History as lived is anything but clear! There is no way to watch the events unfold and make

decisions based on somehow knowing what the outcome will be. Living history is messy, filled with missteps, confusion, mistakes, and choices made on the fly, in the moment, on the spot—with consequences that can be unpredictable and unintended.

Living in a country that has never been occupied, like the U.S., it is hard to imagine the pressures people faced. These pressures were both external (physical threats, lack of food, disappearing neighbors) and internal (fear, family loyalty, national pride, belief systems) and they influenced the choices people made. What seems obvious to us now was probably not at all obvious to anyone then.



If the Vichy government brought peace and saved lives, perhaps that wasn't such a terrible thing. If the British and the Americans bombed your town as they attacked German operations in your country, or demolished the roads they (and you) used, would you welcome them as heroes? If a daring sabotage of a train station by the Resistance resulted in the Germans taking revenge by executing forty townspeople, was it really a good move to make?

But what if you did nothing? How could you allow an invading army to take what you and your family owned, change your way of life, kill your friends, neighbors, and family members? Destroy everything you believed in, everything that mattered to you? What then?

Each French citizen, from the oldest great-grandmother to the youngest child, faced decisions like these on a daily basis. Each had their own story, their own personal concerns to weigh, risks to assess with no idea of how things would turn out, or even what the next day would bring. Sometimes those choices were regrettable, sometimes noble. All were difficult.