

Collaboration in Europe, 1939-1945

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration in wartime not only concerns relations between the occupiers and occupied populations but also the assistance given by any government to a criminal regime. During the Second World War, the collaboration of governments and citizens was a crucial factor in the maintenance of German dominance in continental Europe. It was, moreover, precisely this assistance that allowed for the absolutely unprecedented dimensions of the Holocaust, a crime perpetrated on a European scale.



Pétain meeting Hitler at Montoire on 24 October 1940. From the left: Henry Philippe Pétain, Paul-Otto Schmidt, Adolf Hitler, Joachim v. Ribbentrop. Photo : Heinrich Hoffman.

The occupation of a territory is a common feature of war and brings with it acts of both collaboration and resistance. The development of national consciousness from the end of the 18th century and the growing identification of citizens with the state changed the way such behaviour was viewed, a moral judgement being attributed to loyalty to the state, and to treason against it. During the Second World War, and in connection with the crimes committed by Nazi Germany, the term “collaboration” acquired the particularly negative connotations that it has today.

It cannot be denied that collaboration by governments as well as by individual citizens was a fundamental element

in the functioning of German-occupied Europe. Moreover, unlike the explicit ideological engagement of some Europeans in the Nazi cause, it was by no means a marginal phenomenon. Nor was it limited only to countries occupied by the Wehrmacht: the governments of independent countries such as Finland, Hungary, Romania or Bulgaria collaborated, as did those of neutral countries such as Switzerland, Sweden and Portugal, albeit to varying degrees.

Definition

Collaboration, however varied it may be in its forms and motivations, always amounted to support for Nazi Germany, at the very least in terms of the management of the war. In 1968, the historian Stanley Hoffmann proposed a distinction between a first form of collaboration based on necessity, “state collaboration,” which can be voluntary or involuntary and which aims to maintain public order and economic life (interests shared by both occupiers and occupied)—this was the case of the Vichy government—, and a second form of collaboration, intentional and individual, motivated by conviction or ideological agreement: “collaborationism.” The Polish historian Czesław Madajczyk has made the distinction between “harmful” and “useful” collaboration. But the boundaries between these different forms of collaboration were porous, and many ultra-collaborationists felt they were acting as patriots.

Motivations

In the case both of occupations and alliances (whether accepted freely or not) collaboration was based on shared interests. Notably, Nazi Germany relied on occupied countries, satellite states and allies to ensure supply and provisioning; their cooperation thus became indispensable for the war effort. Through their adherence to Nazi positions, moreover, collaborating governments contributed to legitimising policies of aggression, repression and persecution. For their part, collaborating countries attempted to acquire a more honourable position in the new European order under German domination, to safeguard their independence or to revise the provisions or the frontiers of the peace treaties after 1918. This phenomenon was visible from 1938 onwards in the case of the Balkan states that sought, in particular, to protect themselves from the expansionist designs of the USSR. In 1940, meanwhile, Vichy France hoped to safeguard its territorial integrity, while at the same time taking advantage of the defeat to establish a totalitarian regime.

German strategies and practices

In order to encourage collaboration, Berlin employed numerous official and unofficial agents abroad who had the task of strengthening anti-Communist and anti-Semitic currents and presenting the German totalitarian regime as a model of modernity and social progress. A group emerged of—often young—German “experts” on collaboration including Otto Abetz, ambassador in occupied Paris from 1940 to 1944 who, by alternating between a conciliatory and a inculcating discourse, achieved impressive results. This was also the case of Rudolf Rahn, Manfred von Killinger, Edmund Veessenmayer, and Hermann Neubacher, a close associate of Hermann Göring who managed the exploitation of the economies of South Eastern Europe. In general, economic, military and security issues were given priority over ideological questions: as long as the traditional political, economic and administrative elites were prepared to collaborate and to maintain order, Berlin was little inclined to turn to the extremist collaborators. On an economic level, exchanges were based on “clearing,” a system of negotiated compensation. Presented at first as an alternative to Anglo-Saxon liberalism in order to overcome the debt crisis, clearing was transformed into a formidable tool for the exploitation of European economies.

Radicalisation

The invasion of the USSR by Germany in 1941, presented as a final combat to liberate Europe from Bolshevism, had major repercussions on European collaboration and brought about its gradual radicalisation. The Reich

increased the demands it placed on its partners in terms of weapons shipments, food provisions, workers and combatants. At the same time, opposition to Nazism was organised and resistance movements developed in occupied countries despite severe and systematic repression. The elites in power, prepared until then to cooperate, gradually withdrew their support or no longer collaborated so effectively. They gradually gave way to collaborationist movements. As such, the appointment of Vidkun Quisling as Minister President of Norway in February 1942 raised hopes among collaborators in other occupied territories. In France, while the return of Pierre Laval as head of government in April 1942 did not involve the Parisian collaborationists, it marked the opening of large-scale Franco-German negotiations on shipments to Germany. As a result of German pressure, the collaborationists—Joseph Darnand, Philippe Henriot, Marcel Déat—finally entered the government in December 1943.

The persecution and deportation of the Jews

This widespread collaboration proved particularly disastrous and tragic when it came to the persecution of the Jewish population of Europe. Since the end of the 1930s, German diplomats in European capital cities had been tasked with raising the question of anti-Semitic measures with European governments in order to bring about a convergence of policies. In so doing, Berlin sought to draw on anti-Semitic currents existing since the end of the 19th century. In a certain number of territories occupied by the Reich from the summer of 1941 onwards, the local political forces engaged in pogroms, with or without German incitation. Berlin also sought to use such collaboration to bolster its international propaganda, particularly towards the United States: it was a matter of legitimising the persecution of a section of the population by presenting it as part of a general trend followed by numerous European states. If states seemed reticent to initiate or coordinate this policy, Berlin dispatched experts from the entourage of Adolf Eichmann, including Theodor Dannecker, the organiser of the first deportations in France and, subsequently, in Sofia, Rome and Budapest. In fact, many governments and rulers were willing to hand over the Jews from their territories to the Nazis, thus making a substantial contribution to the European scale of the Holocaust. The exclusion of Jews, their internment and their deportation to German extermination camps were among the principal crimes of European collaboration. Only with the assistance provided by governments and individuals was a crime on such a massive scale possible.

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