

I.8.1. The French Police under the Vichy Regime

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Q. How far did the police support the Vichy regime?

A. Few voices of dissent were raised in the police when the Vichy government first came to power. Influences which might have helped push police officers into opposition to such a regime were silenced. Police trade unions were abolished. The freemasons, who had been very active in police circles, found themselves outlawed. Vichy was not only considered as a legitimate government by most of the rank and file but many, even among formerly republican policemen, actually welcomed its arrival in power. Vichy's charismatic leader, Marshal Philippe Pétain, had considerable public prestige, not least among former soldiers, of which the police counted a large number within its ranks. A new regime often means new opportunities. In its discourse, Vichy elevated the police to the status of an elite corps and obsessively referred to its love of public order. It promised more resources and better pay. Besides, Vichy and the police had some common enemies. The police had long hunted down communists. Mutual hostility was intense as can be seen in the many bloody street fights between police officers and communist militants beginning in the 1920s. Communist newspapers devoted many bitter column inches to anti-police tirades. Little wonder then that when Vichy asked for police help in its anti-communist crusade, police officers responded willingly, monitoring communist activity, arresting militants, torturing many and eventually handing over some to the Nazis. Another common enemy were foreigners, a fact which was to have dire consequences for refugee Jews. Although in Republican France the police had no specific history of anti-Semitism, it did have a long tradition of xenophobia. Given that an important proportion of the Jews targeted by Vichy were foreigners from central Europe, the police force was easily able to adapt its xenophobic traditions to the anti-Semitic stance of this new government. These traditions thus were not alien to the important contribution of the French police to the policy of identifying and interning Jews from 1940 onwards and, then, of participating in their deportation to the death camps of Eastern Europe from 1942. The French, not the German, police arrested most of the 75,000 Jews deported from France.

However, uncritical support for Vichy in police circles faded long before the regime had officially disappeared. Police officers became increasingly disenchanted from mid-1942 onwards. The government had promised them social promotion to the rank of an elite organization but it had massively reneged on its promises. Civil service salaries had been hit particularly badly by the galloping inflation of the period and police working conditions had become quite simply appalling. An increase in manpower had by no means compensated for the new demands made on the force. Political policing increased the workload. The police were expected to track Jews or Resisters but they also had to enforce Vichy's moral agenda, for example, with regard to the increasingly severe repression of abortion. The Vichy period was also one when

criminality increased. In most places manpower levels were said to be at crisis point and everywhere 10–16 hour shifts became the norm. The increase in police services and the damage inflicted by Allied bombing meant that many services were forced into temporary and usually inadequate accommodation. The police may have had machine guns but they often did not have any ammunition to put in them and in many cases had received no training in how to use them. This was a far cry from the elite status that Vichy had promised. The cumulative effect of such working conditions was to demoralize police services. This may not have pushed them automatically into active opposition to Vichy or the Germans but it certainly helped create a climate in which anti-Vichy propaganda could be spread.

By the middle of 1943 it became evident that both Vichy and the Germans were having problems with the French police. Vichy had initially spoken of the police as an elite body but by the summer of 1943 such praise in government discourse was increasingly limited to the specialist mobile force, the *Groupes Mobiles de Réserve*. Ordinary policemen found their own role more and more reduced to that of guarding public buildings. In their annual evaluations the marks given to experienced police officers dropped sharply about this time, indicating that their activity was giving ever less satisfaction to their superiors. Transferring officers from one region to another as a punishment for inactivity became an epidemic. The political branch of the police, the *Renseignements Généraux*, issued Vichy with weekly summaries of public opinion and from the summer of 1943 these began regularly to include a sub-section dealing with opinion within police services. The police was no longer just a tool of the regime, it had become an object of scrutiny.

Resisters themselves began to acknowledge police support. As the occupation progressed, Resistance tracts and BBC broadcasts to occupied France made an increasing distinction between the specialist political branches like the Paris-based *Brigades Spéciales* or the *Groupes Mobiles de Réserve* and the main body of the police who the (non-communist) Resistance generally claimed were sympathetic to their cause. Roger Chevrier, broadcasting on 16 June 1943 in the series ‘Les Français parlent aux Français’, stated that ‘when we refer to the “Vichy police”, it goes without saying that we are not speaking of the whole of the French police of which, we know, the majority are behaving as good patriots, but rather of the minority of sad individuals who have deliberately put themselves in the service of the enemy’.

Help offered by police Resistance was never distributed evenly. Gaullists were far more likely to benefit from the complicity of a policeman than a communist. Jews were much less likely to be offered a helping hand than those seeking to evade the forced labour draft. The difficulty of maintaining a position within the institution often meant that in order to carry out an act of resistance or to engage in complicity with the Resistance frequently involved compensating for this with an ostensible display of zeal in another domain as a cover. This problem even affected those who were the most active Resisters within the force. The end result of these ambiguities was that few police officers had an absolutely clear conscience at the Liberation. Many others could point to an act which could be passed off as an act of Resistance before a tribunal as a counterweight to the rest of their activity.

Police Resistance was not only ambiguous but was also conditioned by a professional culture where traditions of obedience and autonomy co-existed. A cult of obedience was one of the fundamental values within the institution. The state made frequent reference to this concept in order to encourage passive acceptance of its instructions. Individual police officers could shelter behind the notion of obedience to deny any personal responsibility for their actions. How far the institution’s *cult* of

obedience developed into a genuine *culture* of obedience where instructions were unthinkingly obeyed was subject to a number of considerations and varied between different branches within the police, as well as according to the type of mission being carried out. Some branches of the police had particularly tight hierarchical control, thereby helping to secure obedience. But Vichy's constant efforts to tighten and reinforce these controls or to offer incentives for successful completion of a mission demonstrate an awareness that obedience was not always automatic and was subject to constant negotiation between the different actors.

But the institution never did function by orders alone. There remained margins of autonomy and initiative. Rank and file officers had their own input into the repressive process. Indeed, sometimes it was only their initiative and personal observation which brought cases to the attention of the senior hierarchy in the first place. Often the way they wrote their reports could have considerable bearing on a case. Although each rung of the administrative ladder would subsequently paraphrase these into their own words, the fundamental essence of the report usually remained faithful to its initial author. Where Gaullist influence on the police was generally successful was in undermining their enthusiasm to serve Vichy. This undermined the institution in those areas dependent on initiative from below or where subordinate officers could exploit a degree of autonomy. However, Vichy could still hope to ensure the obedience of its civil servants in situations where close hierarchical supervision could be followed by severe punishment. Few open rebellions occurred in closely monitored operations, with the result that in situations where more senior officers were present, police behaviour was often dictated by the attitude of the hierarchical superior on hand, although in many cases even their support for Vichy became problematic.

Although the general trend within the police was for a distancing from Vichy, some branches and some individuals actually became more involved in collaboration as the Liberation approached. In some cases this was due to ideological considerations such as the fear of communist revolution or anger at communist attacks on colleagues which pushed them towards ever greater complicity with the Nazis. Others felt that their own personal record meant that they had little more to lose. Those acting out of ideological obsession or desperation were often quick to splatter the walls of police stations with the blood of arrested Resisters. In Paris, the infamous *Brigades Spéciales* remained zealous to the end.

Q. How and why did Vichy use its police to uphold French national sovereignty?

A. Especially important for Pétain's regime was that the police force was a symbol of the prerogatives of a sovereign state. Vichy was determined to be seen as the guarantor of French sovereignty and independence, because this is the traditional symbol of the legitimacy of a regime. De Gaulle from London, and later Algiers, challenged Vichy's legitimacy by establishing a pseudo-government in exile and claiming to speak in the name of France. Vichy always tried to portray de Gaulle's Free French as British stool pigeons. Vichy ministers generally held strong reservations about the British and resented any British attempt to send agents to or gather information in Vichy-controlled territory.

But defending sovereignty was not just about fending off the British and Gaullists. The Germans posed the biggest threat to French independence by imposing their own laws and arresting French citizens in the Northern Zone of France, which was directly occupied in June 1940. In this zone Vichy's defence of sovereignty in

policing matters took on a very negative form from the outset. To keep policing in this zone in French hands Vichy was prepared to go to extraordinary lengths, including doing the Nazis' dirty work for them. So when the Germans proposed organizing arrests within categories like the Jews or the communists, Vichy pre-empted them. By carrying out the arrests for the Germans, the government hoped to be able to keep at least the administration of the measures in French hands so that the government would be able to control their application and at the same barter this collaboration against concessions in other areas.

In the Northern Zone Vichy was thus forced to accept that the Germans were the masters and limit itself to implementing their measures. In the southern part of France and the French Empire, however, Vichy viewed its role in a very different light. These areas remained unoccupied until November 1942, so defending sovereignty did not just target the Allies or the Resistance but also included some 'anti-German' missions as Vichy was keen to highlight its independence from the Germans. Extreme forms of pro-German propaganda were sometimes punished. These usually involved unflattering descriptions of conditions in France compared to those on the other side of the Rhine. There were some internments of women who had sexual relations with members of Axis Armistice Commissions. The police also arrested black marketeers. Of course, the black market was not just working for the occupation forces but individuals known to be buying goods illicitly for the Germans were also arrested. Until June 1942, those attempting to attract volunteers from the southern zone to work in the Reich were subject to arrest. The police protected sovereignty by operating alongside the secret services to limit the penetration of Vichy territory by agents of foreign powers. In southern France and the French Empire around two thousand Nazi agents were arrested, imprisoned and, in some cases, tortured by the police of this collaborating state. In the unoccupied zones the institution was thus used partly as a means of securing political independence from the Axis powers. Once this zone was occupied in November 1942, the defence of sovereignty took similar forms to that which had already dominated in the Northern Zone. In other words, Pétain's government devoted more energy to ensuring that the administration of policy, even of German inspiration, would be carried out by the French police than to formulating the policies themselves.

Q. What was the specific agreement that was concluded between the Vichy police and the Nazi authorities in France?

A. The obligation on the French police to collaborate was set out in Article 3 of the Franco-German Armistice of June 1940. This stated that:

In the occupied regions of France, the German Reich holds all the prerogatives of an occupying power. The French Government guarantees that it will facilitate by all means the regulations relative to the exercise of these rights and to their execution with the help of the French Administration. The French Government will instruct immediately all the authorities and all the administrative services in the occupied territory to conform to the regulations of the German authorities and to collaborate with these in a correct manner.

A further clause in Article 19 of this same armistice obliged the police to deliver on demand any German citizens present on the territory of France or its colonies. This was to have disastrous effects on German refugees as the extradition of Rudolf

Breitscheid and Rudolf Hilferding was to demonstrate. These two politicians, who had arrived in Marseilles on 1 July 1940, were obvious targets for the Reich: both socialists and anti-Nazis, they had also been influential figures in the Weimar Republic and were particularly associated with a strict application of the Versailles Treaty, closer relations with France and German disarmament. In February 1941 they were arrested by French policemen in their hotel room in Arles and delivered to the waiting Nazis at the demarcation line. Both Hilferding and Breitscheid died during their period of detention following their handing over to the Germans. Hilferding committed suicide in his Parisian prison cell and Breitscheid was killed during an American air-raid on Germany.

Neither the Germans, nor for that matter Vichy, totally respected the terms of the Armistice and in 1942 it was decided to renegotiate the terms of police collaboration. René Bousquet, Vichy's Secretary General in charge of the police, was concerned that the police in the Northern Zone were not adequately under his control, as the Germans often requisitioned them for joint police missions. He was also worried that in the period September 1941 to May 1942 the Germans had executed 471 civilian hostages in reprisal for Resistance attacks against German military personnel. He hoped that a more efficient police force would deter the Germans from intervening directly. On the German side, it was hoped more than ever to be able to use French administrations for the application of Nazi policy. This would spare German personnel needed in other theatres of operation. The Nazis were under no illusions about the French police. They knew that the majority of French policemen despised them and that many were dragging their feet with regard to measures against Gaullists. However, they also knew that they could exploit both the anti-communism and the xenophobia of the French police to encourage collaboration in police actions against communists and Jews. So a new basis for police collaboration was established in the form of the Bousquet-Oberg agreements in August 1942. Oberg, the SS General recently given charge of German security in France, heeded Bousquet's warning that the police were suffering from a patriotic identity crisis. He recognized the independence of the French police. The Germans would henceforth refrain from issuing direct orders to the French police and agreed to pass through the proper administrative channels. The Germans also agreed to abandon the collective execution of civilian hostages, although in fact they executed 254 people between May 1942 and December 1943. The French courts were to be given jurisdiction to try those arrested by the French police, except in cases where a crime was specifically committed against the Germans. The French side of the bargain was that they would increase their campaign against 'terrorism, anarchism and communism'. The agreements were extended to the newly occupied Southern zone in the spring of 1943.

The police emerged as an essential tool of collaboration, vital to Vichy's external political objectives. The prominent place held in Franco-German negotiations by questions of policing became even more paramount as Vichy lost most of its other early bargaining counters. Once the French Empire was occupied by the Allies and the French fleet sunk, the only things left to Vichy to negotiate after November 1942 were the collaboration of state administrations and the resources of French industry. Yet, the potential importance of the French police from a German perspective should not be under-estimated. Vichy's obsession with sovereignty and willingness to do the Nazis' dirty work for them could allow the Germans to occupy France with the minimum deployment of German police and military resources. However, the police, like other administrations, were becoming increasingly reticent in the application of policies of collaboration, particularly once this meant rounding-up young Frenchmen

for the forced labour draft introduced in February 1943. By the end of 1943, the Nazis were once again intervening directly in policing issues on a massive scale. The police continued to operate effectively against communist Resistance but the distinction between communist and non-communist Resistance was becoming increasingly blurred. At the end of December the Nazis decided to give overall control of all policing to the black-shirted fascist Milice, a clear indication that the regular police force was no longer considered sufficiently reliable. Such a decision was something they had sought at all costs to avoid until then because it was realized that it would have detrimental effects on public opinion and might therefore be counter-productive.

Q. What role did the Vichy police play in the persecution of the Jews between 1940 and 1944?

A. Vichy's anti-Semitic policy rested on a distinction between French Jews and foreign Jews. Drawing on long-standing currents of home-grown anti-Semitism, Vichy sought to relegate French Jews to the status of second-class citizens by limiting their influence within the national community. It introduced Jewish Statutes (*Statuts des Juifs*) which defined Jewishness, obliged Jews to register for a census and limited the access of French Jews to certain professions. This often left them destitute and isolated as well as making them easier to identify, rendering them more vulnerable to arrest by the Germans. But for the government, French Jews remained citizens and it showed reticence to organize their deportation. This is highlighted when the figures for the deportation of Jews are analysed more thoroughly. Of 75,000 Jews deported from France, around 50,000 were foreign citizens or stateless Jews, a further 8,000 were French through naturalization, 8,000 were the children of immigrant Jews and around 9,000 were Jews of long-standing French nationality. Prior to the beginning of 1943 French police would generally only arrest their Jewish countrymen if they had failed to register for the census or had broken any other law but even French Jews were generally kept under close surveillance. In the Northern Zone of France the French police also administered the Nazi policy of ensuring that all Jews had gold stars visible on their clothes. Although Vichy refused to introduce this policy in the South of France, it did agree to insist that all Jews had the word 'Juif' clearly stamped in red on their identity cards and again it fell to the police to make sure this was done. Unlike their French counterparts, from October 1940 foreign Jews could be interned for the simple fact of being Jewish. The police monitored their movements and would prevent their exit from the country if this was likely to cause diplomatic incidents for the French with either the Germans or any country these Jewish exiles might be trying to reach. The internment camps where many of these foreign Jews were kept often offered only the most primitive conditions, where food and hygiene were diabolical, with the result that many died there. In the summer of 1942 the internment camps became a trap as police and gendarmes crammed Jews from these camps into railway cattle trucks for a journey eastwards as part of the programme of mass murder known by the euphemism of the 'Final Solution'. It was not the police or the gendarmes who actually killed the Jews (that was done by the Nazis themselves in the death camps of Eastern Europe) but they provided the manpower to guard these convoys. They also supplemented the number of Jews available for deportation by carrying out mass arrests in foreign Jewish communities. Because Vichy was inherently anti-Semitic and also because it viewed foreign Jews as a burden on scarce resources, French Ministers insisted to the Germans that the deportations should not be limited to the Occupied Zone. The South of France thus became the only unoccupied area from

which Jews were deported, as convoys were taken from this zone in August and September 1942. By the end of that year 42,000 Jews had been deported from France. Police cooperation in deportations slowed down considerably in the second half of 1943 and from that point onwards the Germans had to carry out most of the arrests themselves or with the aid of the black-shirted fascist movement, the Milice.

As shocking as the level of deportations from France is, it must be noted that 75 per cent of the Jews in the country were not arrested. This meant that among the occupied countries in Western Europe, only Denmark had a lower rate of deportation. Debate has raged among historians as to why this should be. Most historians reject claims that this was due to Vichy obstructionism, believing instead that it was in spite of, and not because of, Vichy that many Jews escaped. Some, such as Marrus and Paxton, consider limits on deportation were largely a result of occupation policy. Whereas in the Nordic countries, like the Netherlands or Norway, the Nazis were particularly keen to maintain what they saw as the racial purity of the population, this was less of a priority in France, which was in any event populated by Latin people whom Hitler considered to be inferior. Denmark, despite being a 'Nordic' country, foiled the Nazis by saving the vast majority of their Jewish population by smuggling them out to their neutral neighbour Sweden. Another aspect of occupation policy which might offer a partial explanation is that the Italians occupied part of South-east France until their capitulation in the summer of 1943. Despite being a fascist country, Italy refused to lend its support to Hitler's programme of mass murder of the Jews. The Italian authorities therefore actively slowed down the programme of deportation in their zone of occupation, which became a temporary haven for Jews. A further explanation put forward by historians is that offered by the lawyer/historian Serge Klarsfeld who explains that if relatively few Jews were deported from France, it was because some of the population offered active support to the Jews, drawing on French traditions of being a country of refuge. Historians such as Asher Cohen and Lucien Steinberg have mentioned a degree of police resistance in this respect. To the factors mentioned must surely be added the sheer practical difficulty of administering a country as large and diverse as France, offering many hiding places and two frontiers with officially 'neutral' countries (Spain and Switzerland).

Q. How has the role of the Vichy police been remembered since 1944?

A. In the immediate aftermath of the Liberation, memory of the police role during the occupation focused on two contrasting visions.

On the one hand, there was a largely positive image celebrating the role the police had played in the Liberation of some cities. This was particularly the case in Paris where the police had been given a very visible role in the Liberation battle with the strike of the Parisian police, followed by the seizing of the central police Headquarters, the Préfecture de Police. This Préfecture was given huge symbolic importance by the fact that it was here that the German General von Choltitz was brought to sign the German surrender. One of de Gaulle's first acts when he arrived in Paris in August 1944 was to pin the prestigious Légion d'Honneur to the flag of the Préfecture de Police. The state was reasserting the authority of the police through such an action which many interpreted as a rehabilitation. Surprisingly this type of praise for the police in the immediate post-Liberation period was not limited to de Gaulle. Resistance newspapers, including communist papers, hailed the unity between the police and the public in August 1944. The institution, both in Paris and the provinces, was determined to milk this new-found legitimacy. In Toulon, policemen took to the

streets behind a banner declaring 'Police in the Service of the People'. Photos of Resistance events at the Liberation, whether these were processions or head-shavings of women collaborators, often feature policemen in prominent positions. Many police officers sincerely believed that this was the dawning of a new age in police–public relations.

But there was also a more negative image detectible which meant that the optimism of police officers in 1944 always had a fragile foundation. The ten days in which the police were actively and massively engaged in the Resistance could only temporarily disguise the four years since the defeat of 1940 when the police had been used by the French Government as an instrument of political oppression, anti-Semitic persecution and collaboration with the Nazis. The heroic newspaper headlines of August 1944 soon gave way to news of purges of officials who had tainted themselves through collaboration. What's more, the police Resistance organizations, the very foundations of the new legitimacy, quickly found themselves embroiled in a damaging scandal in the shape of the Joanavici affair. This was the sordid tale of a Jew who had grown rich during the war and managed to escape deportation to the death camps by maintaining a network of powerful contacts, by trading with the Nazis and working closely with their intelligence services. The snag for the French police was that it emerged in 1947 that it was this same individual, Joseph Joanavici, who had financed one of the institution's most powerful Resistance organizations, seemingly as a safeguard against prosecution for his wartime activities. As the new legitimacy crumbled, some of the old gripes against the police returned to centre stage. The protection offered to the wealthy Joanavici fuelled a traditional image of the institution as the defenders of wealth and privilege. The onset of the Cold War also had repercussions in France as the communists were ostracized. Communists who had been integrated into the new riot police, the *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité* (CRS), found themselves unceremoniously ousted from the force at the end of 1947. During the strikes of that period protesters highlighted that the anti-communist activities of the police during the occupation had not been forgotten by chanting the slogan 'CRS = SS'.

This same slogan would re-emerge during the student demonstrations of May 1968. By that time de Gaulle had been in power for almost ten years and had shown a worrying inclination to rehabilitate some aspects of the Vichy police. In the early 1960s he had chosen the former Vichy administrator Maurice Papon as his Prefect of police in Paris and under his command the police had violently repressed both an Algerian demonstration in October 1961 and a communist demonstration at Charonne at the beginning of 1962, both incidents which led to deaths among the demonstrators. Even more explicit were the Vichy overtones when the name of the provincial police force was changed from its traditional Republican name of *Sûreté Nationale* (which had been re-adopted in 1944) back to *Police Nationale*, a title Vichy had given it in 1941. The authoritarianism of de Gaulle's 'police state' was heavily criticized by the student protesters in 1968.

Broadly speaking, criticisms of the Vichy police focused essentially on anti-communist policing prior to the 1980s. The decline of the French Communist Party shifted the emphasis. Likewise, the rise of the extreme right Front National. This party, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, was seen by many as a threat to democracy and a reminder of the racist and anti-Semitic policy which held sway at Vichy. This shifted the emphasis away from anti-communism towards anti-Semitic policing. Renewed vigour was given to collective memory in this respect by the lengthy preparations for the successive trials (or retrials) of former wartime administrators or militants which

continued to be covered in the news throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, the preparation of the trials against René Bousquet and Maurice Papon underlined the wartime role of the police against the Jews. Bousquet was actually assassinated in June 1993 while awaiting trial but Papon was eventually brought to trial in April 1998. Between these two events, President Jacques Chirac had done something which none of his predecessors had been prepared to do. On 16 July 1995, he had officially acknowledged the role of the French State, including its police, in the round-up of Jews for deportation.

The wartime role of the police has of course also been remembered in both culture and in historical analysis. The cinema has generally represented the Vichy police as cowardly. In the film *Lacombe, Lucien*, Louis Malle and Patrick Modiano show a gendarme who is unprepared to intervene against Lucien, the anti-hero of the film, who is trying to queue-jump in a line waiting outside a butcher's shop once he learns that Lacombe is a member of the French Gestapo. The Marcel Aymé-inspired film *La traversée de Paris* had highlighted a similar interpretation when we are shown the reluctance of two police officers to intercept a couple of individuals transporting black market goods on the grounds that they are speaking German, or at least pretending to. The accusation returns in a different form in another Aymé-inspired film, *Uranus*, where the police at the Liberation are only prepared to intervene against a communist when they find out that he is no longer a card-carrying member. In this image there is little room for police Resistance. It is true that René Clément's *Paris brûle-t-il* glorifies the role of the police in the Parisian insurrection, while Jean-Pierre Melville's *Armée des ombres* portrays gendarmes who deliberately turn a blind eye to the transporting of clandestine radios. But these portrayals are exceptions.

Historians, for their part, were generally slow to examine the Vichy police in any detail. In 1972, in his influential *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* the American historian Robert Paxton complained of the absence of research concerning the police in France during the Second World War. This silence was part of a wider gap within French scholarship where, until the end of that decade, policing questions were generally given little academic consideration. But absence of research was indeed even more obvious with regard to the years between 1940 and 1944 when the semi-autonomous Vichy government tried to use its police as a key element of its collaboration with the Nazi occupier. Scholarly reluctance to address this period of police history originated partly from a practical question: the belief that archival sources could not be found or that the subject was likely to be something of a minefield. But there was also a more political consideration. Before the 1970s it had been assumed that when the police had rounded up Jews or those to be sent for forced labour or when it had arrested Resisters, they were simply obeying the dictates of the Nazi occupier. The realization inspired by Paxton and others that the French government had taken a large dose of initiative in the process opened up a new field of scholarly enquiry. From the late 1970s onwards the historiography began to examine much more closely the responsibility of French policing agencies in carrying out German dirty work. Another brick was added to the historical memory in the early 1990s when researchers began to apply a 'history from below' approach to examine how police officers themselves reacted to the constraints and opportunities offered by the occupation.

Broadly speaking, two competing historiographies of the police during the Vichy years have emerged. On the one hand, the official history of the institution pretends that the vast majority of policemen entered the Resistance at an early stage and spent their time engaging in the most spectacular forms of Resistance activity.

Written mainly by former policemen, this official historiography accepts the existence of a few 'stray sheep' who actively sought collaboration, but pays little attention to the very real desire on the part of the Vichy government to use its police as a tool of collaboration. This causes it to overlook the fact that when police opposition to collaboration remained passive, this passivity had far worse consequences than in other socio-professional categories. On the other hand, the vision of mainstream scholarly memory often portrays the police as an institution whose members readily accepted Vichy and German orders. In this version the police remained obedient until a change of position, inspired largely by opportunism, led to an inevitable turning of coats in the summer of 1944. This vision undoubtedly over-simplifies the issue because it under-estimates the ambiguities in the position of the Vichy police.

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