

Why did so many Europeans collaborate with Nazi Occupiers?

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Following the Nazi occupation of mainland Europe, the peoples of the occupied nations began to look at how the war would seem to play out and how best to interact with the Germans. In my essay, I will look at the very idea of collaboration and how it relates to different countries in Europe. I will also look at the levels of collaboration and why different peoples collaborated.

When looking into the idea of collaboration we must first examine the very basis of the term. What we mean by collaboration can be a very relative argument. For instance, is the labour of French citizens in German factories labelled as collaboration despite the fact that for the most part it was forced labour? Can someone who gave directions to a German soldier be labelled as a collaborator? Or is it anyone who did not attempt any form of resistance? One of the key issues that affected how the occupied peoples interacted with their Nazi invaders was the way that their Government was set up and to what extent the Nazi ideology was forced onto the country. For instance, in a nation such as Poland where the vast majority of the public were seen as sub species to the German race. The number of non Jewish Poles was about the same number as Jewish Poles that were killed during the Nazi occupation at about three million each.¹ The difference was "The Jews were sentenced to death, whereas Poles had the chance, the possibility and the 'right' to remain alive."² Obviously, the Polish peoples were less likely to collaborate with their new Nazi occupiers compared to areas such as Finland where the Nazi's took a lighter touch to governance.

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My first reason why people collaborated with the Nazi's is based on the Soviet Union. Because of the make up of the Soviet Union as a multinational empire, only around half of the population of the Soviet Union was actually Russian. The rest had been taken over during the peace that occurred between Hitler and Stalin between 1939 and 1941. Thus, the Nazis were able to find collaborators in these countries as the local indigenous population thought of

the Nazi's as liberators from the Stalinist regime and its brutal policies. Those that disagreed with the methods and the entire regime in fact of the Soviet Union and its leader Joseph Stalin found that collaboration was a good alternative. One such man was General Andrei Vlasov who was one of the heroes of the Battle of Moscow in 1942. When he became a prisoner of war, he was willing to have the Germans use his name due to his anti-Stalinist beliefs. He became the leader of a Russian anti-Soviet group of around 50,000 prisoners of war that were equipped (although poorly) to fight against the Soviets for the Wehrmacht. However, due to the Germans distrust of this small Russian army, it was never used in the war.³ Obviously, the reasons for their support of Hitler and their following collaboration with the German Army was the ideological differences and their memories of the atrocities caused by the Soviet Union. Also the conditions in POW camps in the east were dire and the support that these troops gave enabled them to escape the camps.

In the East, smaller states were more than eager to help the Nazis in rounding up Jews for the holocaust due to their ambition to establish themselves as a nation and part of the Fascist regime rounded up many Jews and Slavs to be murdered by the Nazis. Clearly another reason for collaboration was the identity of the state itself and their ambition to be recognized as a true fascist state.⁴ One of the main examples of collaboration however was Vichy France. As the state under Marshal Petain had made peace with Germany, the Free French zone was under extreme pressure to collaborate with the Nazis and this they did on several fronts. The reasons for the collaboration also show some of the reasons why others in Europe collaborated. No one knew when the war would end and it seemed to those alive in occupied Europe at the time that the Nazi's would be there for an indefinite period so, in order to make their lives more normal and more simple, they collaborated and helped the Nazis continue running the state. In the case of Vichy France, this involved sending thousands of Jews to the Nazi death camps in Eastern Europe, however, it is important to highlight that French Jews were mostly spared so the nationalistic ideals of the French were more important than the Racial ideals of the Germans. Also,

Marshal Petain claimed to be “un bouclier, a shield protecting France.”⁵ French collaboration was seen by those who ran Vichy as a way of keeping France great and protecting the French identity. In return, 700,000 Frenchmen were sent to Germany to work as manual labour, 75,000 Jews were deported and 150,000 hostages were killed.⁶ Obviously, the collaboration had a price, but the administration saw this as one of the costs of protecting French interests and keeping a France that was free.

However, the interests of the nations and the soldiers differed from those in the actual occupied countries themselves. I believe that those who did collaborate with the Nazis did it for different reasons. The first reason I feel is that of self preservation. This is the idea that people will do what they need to do to survive. Although on a more basic level than that of whole nations and armies, it could be argued that ordinary citizens who simply got along with their lives, not trying to dismantle the state that the Nazis had set up in their country were in effect collaborating. They were simply accepting that the Nazis were in control of their country and the best thing to do is simply to try and lead a normal life inside of it. That, in essence is collaboration when compared to the French Resistance aided by the SOE (Special Operations Executive) who would blow up the infrastructure in an attempt to make the life harder for the Nazi war machine. In truth, collaboration could be as simple as sleeping with the enemy as it were. “The most reliable calculation is the total number of French children born as a result of German-French liaisons for the entire territory and for the entire occupation period was as high as 200,000.”⁷ The reasons for these relationships could be as basic as survival needs. The German soldiers often had access to food and with a German soldier, there was a better chance of survival. This was particularly evident in the case of Jewish women who could get favors from German soldiers or even survive thanks to these intimate relationships.⁸

There is also the case of forced labour. By doing the work set by the Nazis in labour camps, had the peoples of Europe actually collaborated or were they simply doing it in fear of death? It is a difficult line to draw between collaboration and intimidation

into work and also forceful work. Although it may seem simple enough, the people could have resisted and therefore would not have collaborated with their Nazi occupiers. Some of the French actually helped the Nazi war efforts, or at least served the state. "At the level of behavior, several hundred thousand of those occupied went to work for the occupiers or sought their orders from them."⁹ The fact is that when the war seems to have no end in sight, and it appears that the Nazis will be occupying the nation for a long period of time, then often collaboration would be a more welcome alternative to take to resistance for many of the peoples of Europe. After all, what is the point in resisting a nation with the size and power of Nazi Germany when there is little hope of there being a favorable outcome? I believe that this is the main reason why people in Europe collaborated with their Nazi occupiers. It can be believed that "Western European nations contributed to the German war economy and -were it not for the Allies- to their own future enslavement."¹⁰ Although this could be a rather dark assessment of the future of Europe, as western Europe, especially the more Germanic areas were relatively well off following the Nazi invasion in comparison to Eastern areas of Europe and Slavic territory, it does highlight the problem faced by many of the peoples of Europe - they didn't know what was coming. No one knew how the war would end up, whether the Allies would retake Europe or whether Fascism would rule the world. If the latter was to be the case then most people in Europe I believe would have collaborated with the Nazis for the obvious reason that to them there was no point in resisting. "Collaboration, at least on the imperially vital matters of finance and policing, was pursued by mainstream politicians and supported by the majority of citizens in the believe that collaboration was in their societies' best interest."¹¹

When looking into the ideas of collaboration for Europe, it is easy to look deeply into the mass execution and deportation of the Jews and decide that this was all that collaboration was and Europeans did assist in this. The genocide of the Jews is one part of the collaboration of the peoples of Europe and it helped to keep some certain areas of Europe safe from full scale Nazi occupation, whereas other areas in Eastern Europe were

destroyed by it. On a more basic level, the peoples of Europe collaborated because it made their lives easier and they saw that the Nazis would be in their country for the long term. Nazi ideology proclaimed of a thousand year Reich, one which following the fast moving invasions of the Blitzkrieg in the early years of the war, it seemed to many in Europe that the Nazis would win the war. Many Europeans felt shamed after the war for how they collaborated with the Nazis and it only deepened the humiliation of their national spirit after the Nazis had invaded.

The men that collaborated and even joined the SS played a major part in the closing stages of the war. I do not think it is possible to pin down the exact reason why these men of the 33. *Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS Charlemagne (französische Nr. 1)* joined up to fight with the Nazis, undoubtedly they all had different reasons. One thing that is striking however is that when the French look back at what happened during the war, how their own people were in Berlin, fighting for Hitler in the closing days of the war, is their disbelief at what their country did. "France is the only government in all Europe whose government collaborated. Others signed an armistice or surrendered, but France was the only country to have collaborated and voted laws which were even more racist than the Nuremberg laws, as the French racist criteria were even more demanding than the German racist criteria. It's not something to be proud of."¹²

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- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 France under the Germans; P Burrin; New York Press 1996
- 10 Does Conquest Pay?: The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies By Peter Liberman; Princeton University Press 1998
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Dr Claude Levy from the documentary film, The Sorrow and the Pity, which was a collection of interviews of Frenchmen, a group of whom collaborated with the Germans during the war and how they felt about their actions after.