

Sydney Film Festival 2001

Collaboration and resistance in Vichy France

The Sorrow and the Pity directed by Marcel Ophuls

By Richard Phillips
16 August 2001

The Sorrow and the Pity: Chronicle of a French City Under Occupation, Marcel Ophuls' four-and-a-half-hour epic on Germany's World War II occupation of France, was screened at the recent Sydney Film Festival. First shown 30 years ago in Paris, the film, which has now been re-released on DVD, is rightly regarded as one of cinema's more significant documentaries and one of the few that uncovers the French ruling class's collaboration with Nazi Germany from 1940 to 1944.

Ophuls' film not only exposes the political repression and anti-Semitism in Vichy France and growing opposition to the regime, but it also questions the postwar mythology created about Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement. Although not a full record of the period, and there are some significant omissions, the film is a remarkable introduction to these times.

Marcel Ophuls, the only son of film and stage director Max Ophuls and actress Hilde Wall, was born in Germany in 1927 and lived through some of the period covered by the documentary. Ophuls' family moved to France in 1933, where his father continued to direct films, served in the French army as a private from 1939-40 and was also involved in producing anti-Nazi radio broadcasts. The family fled Paris in 1940, just days before German troops took over the city, travelling to Spain and then making their way to the US in 1941.

Marcel Ophuls returned to France with his parents in 1950 and worked as an assistant director on John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (1953) and his father's *Lola Montès* (1955). After some unsuccessful features in the early 1960s, Marcel turned to documentaries and made *Munich or Peace in Our Time* (1967) and *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969). He followed this with *The Harvest of My Lai* (1970), about the Vietnam War; *A Sense of Loss* (1972), on the Northern Ireland conflict; and *The Memory of Justice* (1976), which deals with the Nuremberg trials, French colonial rule of Algeria and US intervention in Vietnam. After a 12-year break from filmmaking he made *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (1988), which won an Academy award, *November Days* (1992) and more recently *The Troubles We've Seen: A History of Journalism in Wartime* (1994).

The Sorrow and the Pity is divided in two and mainly focuses on life in Clermont-Ferrand, a town of 150,000 close to Vichy in the Auvergne region. The first part, *The Collapse*, roughly sketches the political crisis of the French bourgeoisie—its military disintegration in the face of the German army and the division of France into two territories, the Occupied Zone and the so-called Unoccupied Zone. *The Choice*, the second half of the film, deals with opposition to the regime, its eventual disintegration and defeat.

The Occupied Zone was directly ruled by the Nazis and covered the whole of the Atlantic and Channel coasts, including all the richer areas of western, northern and northeastern France. The Unoccupied Zone, which

was governed by a pro-Nazi Bonapartist regime headed by Marshall Philippe Pétain, a French World War I officer, with Pierre Laval as prime minister, controlled central, southern and southeastern France. The Nazis, according to Pétain and his supporters, were defenders of civilisation against communism. The central slogan of Pétain's government was "Work, Family, Country".

Using in-depth interviews of contemporary participants—36 in all—combined with newsreel and archival footage to either underline or contradict their testimonies, *The Sorrow and the Pity* builds up a mosaic-like portrait of the period. Those interviewed, many of them by Ophuls himself, include members of the German military, French collaborationists and fascist-minded aristocrats, liberal democrats, English diplomats and spies, factory owners, fence-sitting members of the middle class, teachers and shopkeepers as well as peasant members of the Resistance.

The film begins with a cigar-smoking Helmut Tachsend, a former Wehrmacht captain and a member of the occupying force, who claims that French people welcomed the Nazis with open arms. Interviewed at his son's wedding, Tachsend boasts about his wartime exploits. The documentary cuts between Tachsend and Nazi propaganda newsreels denouncing France as a "disgrace to the white race" because it had Vietnamese and African soldiers in its army.

Archival footage, including speeches by Pétain and Pierre Laval, is used with comments from collaborators who candidly tell Ophuls that they supported Pétain because they believed that he would crush communist militants, stop working class unrest and guarantee a strong position for France in a new German-dominated Europe. By contrast, a lower-ranking German soldier tells Ophuls later in the film that he was relieved when the Nazi armies were defeated. "If Hitler had won," he says, "I would probably still be a soldier today, occupying Africa, America or somewhere else."

Apart from some minor disruptions in the first weeks of the German occupation in June 1940, social life for the Parisian bourgeoisie and upper middle classes resumed as usual—fashion shows, theatre, opera and horse racing. As one of those interviewed explains: "The city was a wild and crazy place and Maxim's did great business. Everyone is ashamed to say it today but life in Paris was great."

Against this backdrop Ophuls charts the wave of Nazi government and Vichy regime repression unleashed against masses of ordinary people. Political parties were banned, strikes outlawed, and thousands of socialist-minded workers, Jews, Gypsies and refugees from fascist Spain were witchhunted, imprisoned and then transported to German concentration camps. Pseudo-scientific race theories and anti-Semitic propaganda, including the French-produced film *Le Péril Juif*, depicting Jews as sub-human, were promoted throughout the country.

One of the interviewees, Claude Lévy, who has written one of most complete accounts of Jewish persecution in France and was an active member of the Resistance from the age of 16, provides details on the infamous Velodrome d'Hiver events in mid-July 1942, when French police rounded up nearly 13,000 Parisian Jews—including 4,051 children—and jailed them in the d'Hiver cycling stadium. Five days later, these prisoners were loaded onto cattle cars and transported to Drancy concentration camp just outside Paris and then to the Auschwitz death camp. In fact, French officials deported some 75,000 Jews, including 12,000 children, to Nazi camps between 1941-44, where they were executed.

Many of those interviewed, however, feign ignorance or memory loss when questioned by Ophuls about these events. Prime Minister Laval's son-in-law maintains that his father-in-law opposed racism while two teachers who lived through these events claimed that they could not remember any laws banning Jewish teachers from French schools. Ophuls interviews Marius Klein, a French shopkeeper who, fearing boycotts, fire bombings or deportation, maintained an advertisement in the local paper for the duration of the Occupation declaring that he was not Jewish.

Ophuls' documentary also has brief footage of Jacques Doriot, a former French Communist Party (PCF) leader who was elected to the Chamber of Deputies but broke with the organisation in 1934 and went on to form the extreme rightwing French Popular Party in 1936. Doriot supported the Nazis and collaborated directly with the German occupying force.

Towards the end of *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Andrew Harris, one of the film's producers, conducts a chilling interview with Christian de la Mazière, a French aristocrat and fascist thug. De la Mazière was one of 7,000 Frenchmen who enlisted in the Charlemagne Division, a special German SS unit assigned to the Eastern Front. De la Mazière explains that although infatuated by the mystical and religious components of fascism, its main attraction for him was its determination to stamp out all socialist organisations and ideas.

"You have to understand France at the time when I was growing up," he explains. "In 1934 every school was a battleground with talk of revolution everywhere—France, Spain and North Africa. We had to choose between one or another revolutionary party and my revolutionary party was fascism. How could a boy raised from my background, not be an anti-communist?"

The Sorrow and the Pity pays little attention to Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement, the force created by a small group of French ruling class elements opposing the Nazis. In postwar France, de Gaulle and the Free French movement were promoted as the leading figures in the anti-Nazi resistance but contrary to the official government version, De Gaulle, who fled to Britain in June 1940, had little popular support within France. Apart from limited backing from French colonial governors in Syria, Madagascar and Algeria, the self-appointed leader was almost entirely dependent on the British and US military.

Rather than directly exposing the de Gaulle mythology, Ophuls highlights the self-sacrifice and heroism of ordinary workers and peasants who battled the German military and the Vichy regime with no outside assistance for years. De Gaulle only briefly appears in newsreel footage and none of the Resistance members interviewed have any connection with him or the Free French movement. The film also includes scathing remarks by Resistance members against bourgeois elements who later falsely claimed to have fought the fascists.

Denis Rake, a British spy and nightclub performer operating in Paris during the occupation, explains: "I was given no assistance by the French bourgeoisie [at this time] but workers gave us everything we needed. Food, cigarettes and even the shirts off their backs if we'd asked."

Louis Grave, a peasant farmer who ran a local Resistance unit with his brother Alexis from their cellar, gives a self-effacing but deeply moving account of his underground activities. Grave was betrayed by a local

villager, captured by authorities and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. Local Resistance fighters gathered in Grave's farmhouse kitchen describe the repression and torture unleashed against friends and family suspected of opposing the fascists. These unassuming heroes tell Ophuls they felt no desire to exact revenge on those who collaborated or betrayed Resistance members to the authorities—the central issue, they explain, is to ensure that similar forces do not emerge again today.

The Sorrow and the Pity concludes with archival footage of entertainer Maurice Chevalier attempting to justify a musical engagement in Nazi Germany. You must understand, he declares, before bursting into a rendition of *Sweeping the Clouds Away*, that this visit was not to entertain German troops but to "cheer up" French prisoners in a concentration camp. The effect is chilling.

The Sorrow and the Pity provoked a storm of controversy in France. It was originally planned as the second in a three-part television documentary on contemporary French history, but ORTF, the government-controlled broadcaster, refused to screen the film when it was completed in 1969. The film was not released until April 1971, almost two years later, when it was shown at a small cinema in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

Like much of the artistic work produced in the aftermath of May-June 1968 student revolt and general strike, Ophuls' film sought to undermine the political credibility of Charles de Gaulle's rightwing government and his claims to have led the Resistance. As Andrew Harris later explained: "What irritated me was not the Resistance but resistancialism, which, though it misrepresented the reality of history, nevertheless littered literature, film, casual conversation, and children's textbooks."

In fact, Ophuls and the documentary's producers—Andrew Harris and Alain de Sédouy—who actively supported the May-June 1968 movement, had clashed with ORTF management during the strike and were dismissed from the network before the completion of *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Ophuls went to work for German television and the film was finalised with Swiss and German financing.

Gaullist politicians and sections of the French intelligentsia were outraged over the movie and denounced it as "unpatriotic". ORTF network chief Jean-Jacques de Bresson, a former Resistance member, told a government committee that the film "destroys myths that the people of France still need".

One alarmed critic declared that the film undermined France's attempts "to regain her rank" and that "any wallowing in shame, any prolonged and extensive purges aimed at weeding out all those who in any way had done wrong, would only have served the designs of those among France's allies who wanted to relegate her to a minor role in the postwar era".

The danger was, he continued, "foreign audiences, especially in nations that have had reasons to resent French post-war actions, or to suspect that the Official Version is a whitewash, will accept only too willingly *The Sorrow and the Pity* as the real and whole truth."

The documentary, however, screened for 87 weeks in Paris and was widely shown at film festivals and in serious cinemas in Europe and the US throughout the decade. *The Sorrow and the Pity*'s intimate on-location interviews and the restrained and often-ironic use of archival footage influenced a new generation of documentary and feature filmmakers. In 1981, more than a decade after it was made, Ophuls' film was finally broadcast on French television where it attracted an audience of 15 million viewers.

Some cautionary remarks, however, need to be made about Ophuls' documentary. The film does not explore two central issues: Why was there no initial mass working class resistance to the German occupation? Why were Charles de Gaulle and his rightwing Free French movement, which had little popular support in France in the early 1940s, able to take state power following the collapse of the German occupation?

These questions cannot be answered without examining the role of the

French Communist Party (PCF), something that Ophuls' documentary does not do and which leaves the door open for pessimistic conclusions. One critic, for example, has claimed that *The Sorrow and the Pity* proves "the all-too-human ability to abandon morality when military force and propaganda make it convenient to do so".

In fact, the German occupation of France and the emergence of the Vichy regime were not the result of "human flaws" but the end product of the counter-revolutionary policies pursued by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and its satellite organisations in France and elsewhere, which strangled independent action against fascism by the working class.

In the aftermath of Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933—made possible by Stalin's policies that divided and paralysed the German working class—the Soviet bureaucracy openly allied itself with Germany's imperialist rivals. In order to prove themselves to their new partners, the Stalinists suppressed the revolutionary struggles of the working class in country after country.

Socialism was taken off the agenda through the Popular Front policy, adopted in 1935 by the Communist International, which subordinated the working class to alliances with various bourgeois political parties. Under this banner, the Spanish revolution and the struggle against Franco's fascists in the 1930s was sabotaged and betrayed.

In France, the Communist Party urged workers to support the Popular Front government that came to power in May 1936, which was headed by Socialist Party leader Leon Blum and included the bourgeois Radical Party under the leadership of Édouard Daladier. Claiming that this regime represented a "lesser evil", the PCF leadership undermined mass strike action and occupations by French workers in June and July 1936 and a general strike in November 1938. In this revolutionary situation, the Stalinists opposed any struggle by the working class for its independent interests and created widespread political disorientation.

The defeats of the working class only strengthened the hand of reaction. In France, Daladier, previously hailed as a progressive by the Stalinists, became prime minister in 1938 and began reversing the gains won in the 1936 strike movement. Daladier's government attacked the trade unions and accommodated itself to those seeking a rapprochement with the Nazis.

Far from reversing its disastrous policies, the Soviet bureaucracy sought to preserve itself by reaching a deal with Hitler—a step that paralysed any struggle against fascism and led directly to World War II. On August 21, 1939, the Soviet bureaucracy concluded the German-Soviet mutual defence agreement—the infamous Stalin-Hitler pact—declaring that Hitler's Germany was a friend of the USSR. Communist parties around the world, including the PCF, endorsed this policy and instructed members to oppose any imperialist war waged against Germany.

This ensured that when Hitler's troops took control of France in June 1940 there was no organised working class resistance. The PCF, although operating underground, having been illegalised in September 1939 by the Daladier government, made no attempt to oppose the occupying forces or the Vichy government. In fact, the PCF denounced de Gaulle from a rightwing standpoint for collaborating with the British.

The PCF took no serious interest in the Resistance until a year later in June 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The Stalinist bureaucracy, having previously characterised Britain and the US as enemies of the USSR, suddenly redefined these imperialist powers as allies. The PCF began collaborating with de Gaulle's forces and directed their cadre to join the Resistance, taking control of the most important organisations. In the months before D-Day, the PCF dominated the six-man National Resistance Council (CNR), the Committee for Military Action (COMAC), and the steering committees for the Liberation of Paris (CPL).

Although socialist-minded workers in France saw the collapse of the German occupation as an opportunity to put an end to capitalism, the PCF

had other plans. In line with guarantees given by Stalin to the US and Britain at the 1943 Teheran Conference, which organised the political shape of post-war Europe, the French Stalinists helped hoist de Gaulle into power and then contained and disbanded the Resistance. In exchange, the French Stalinists were given leading ministerial positions—including production and labour, national economy and defence—in de Gaulle's first postwar government.

As de Gaulle later admitted in his memoirs, PCF leader Maurice Thorez "helped put an end to the last vestiges of the 'patriotic militia' whom some people obstinately sought to maintain in a new underground ... [and] among the workers he did not stop advocating the slogan of working to the utmost and of producing, cost what it might".

Despite its failure to analyse these critical issues and therefore present a complete picture of this period, *The Sorrow and the Pity* is still a valuable record of life in German-occupied France and a useful starting point for future documentary filmmakers attempting to analyse this crucial period. It certainly deserves much a wider audience than those able to attend film festivals.

See Also:

Sydney Film Festival 2001

An ironic look at some reluctant heroes

Divided We Fall, directed by Jan Hřebejk, script by Petr Jarchovský [12 July 2001]

"Art wedded to truth must, in the end, have its rewards"

The Apu Trilogy, written and directed by Satyajit Ray [2 August 2001]

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>