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The context of exile:
communities, circumstances
and choices

Quitter la France est, pour un français, une situation funèbre.
(Honoré de Balzac, Le Cousin Pons)

An independent-minded people, with a strong cultural awareness and attachment to region, if not always to nation, the French have generally made unhappy exiles. It has been their misfortune that the many crises punctuating French history have compelled them to take refuge abroad, especially in Britain, a land that is so ‘alike’ France yet so ‘different’. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious persecution was the spur. The Massacre of Saint Bartholomew in 1572 and Louis XIV’s Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 banished Protestants aplenty: soldiers, lower nobility and, crucially, artisans and craftsmen, men whose skills came to be missed in France and resented among rival workers in Britain. In the eighteenth century, it was the turn of the philosophes, Voltaire and Rousseau, hounded out by the ideological intolerance of absolutism, the latter spending much of his time, miserably, in the mists and rain of Derbyshire, the source of the following piece of doggerel:

At Wootton-under-Weaver,
Where God came never!

The philosophes were themselves succeeded by some 100,000–150,000 émigrés of all kinds – soldiers, priests, sailors, peasants and pastry cooks, significantly not just aristocrats as is sometimes claimed – fleeing the excesses of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic regimes. Most of these unwilling exiles, maybe up to two-thirds, had returned to France by 1801, when Napoleon signed a Concordat with the Pope and made overtures to appease the nobility, although a handful of die-hard monarchists bided their time and did not re-establish themselves in
their homeland until the restoration of the Bourbons in 1814–15.6 Paradoxically, it was not long before French kings were travelling in the opposite direction. Both Charles X and Louis-Philippe took refuge in Britain following the revolutions of 1830 and 1848; and, in 1870, there came a Bonaparte, Napoleon III, who had already spent some of his earlier life in London enrolling, in 1848, as a special constable at the time of the Chartist demonstrations in Hyde Park. After the collapse of the Second Empire in 1870, he set up an ersatz court at Chislehurst in Kent, where he died in 1873, not so far from Petts Wood, the temporary home of General de Gaulle in autumn 1940. For many years afterwards, the Orpington Museum proudly displayed a copy of de Gaulle’s bill for coal deliveries.7

The upheavals that toppled kings and emperors also uprooted revolutionaries and artists. The political activists Godefroy Cavaignac, Louis Blanc, and Alexandre Ledru-Rollin all took shelter in London, as did the writer and painters Victor Hugo, Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet, the latter pair seeking to escape the upheavals of the Paris Commune of 1871, which had seen their homes occupied by Prussian troops.8 They were accompanied by several Communard insurgents, the most notorious being the journalist Jules Vallès, who wrote extensively, and very critically, of his time in London; most of these exiles returned after an amnesty was declared in 1878, although a small number remained to settle in Soho, for example the Bertaux family who set up a patisserie in Greek Street, an establishment that survives to this day, albeit under new Anglo-French ownership.9 In the following decade, the ideological battles of the Boulanger Affair brought forth the general himself, together with one of his most committed champions, the writer Henri Rochefort. During the 1890s, the Dreyfus Affair led to a fresh round of exiles, notably that of the novelist Emile Zola, who lived a clandestine existence in Weybridge where he largely kept himself to himself, taking photographs of the neighbourhood and following events in France.10 Ironically Esterhazy, the man who had sparked off the whole scandal by selling secrets to the Germans, probably to finance his mistresses and gambling debts, also escaped French justice by hiding in London. Men and women of a very different moral calibre – monks and nuns belonging to religious orders dissolved by the so-called lois d’exception of 1901 and 1904 – followed in the footsteps of Esterhazy, discovering Protestant Britain a far more tolerant refuge than the secular and purportedly liberal-minded Third Republic.11 It was a symbolic act when the convent at Montmartre,
dedicated to the English martyrs and set up by religious originally expelled at the time of the Reformation, was transferred to Tyburn in the centre of London. As Aidan Bellanger records, history seemed to ‘have turned full-circle’.12

Ideological intransigence, religious persecution and revolution had thus been the principal factors driving the French across the Channel. In the early years of the twentieth century commercial factors became the key. Although the stagnation in French population growth did not necessarily create a ready band of economic exiles, the downturn in the European economy in the 1880s, the allure of London as a business centre and the growing diversification of commercial activities attracted several large businesses to Britain. On the eve of the First World War, there were 30,000 or so French living in the British Isles, the third largest group of European exiles. What is astonishing is that such an important group of immigrants should have been constantly overlooked by historians who have tended to concentrate on German, Russian and Italian arrivals.13 Something of the reasons for this neglect are addressed in Chapter 5, but it might well stem from the fact that sources on the French are hard to come by, as they were for this present study.

War, that defining feature of the twentieth century, also drew the French to Britain, although it should be stressed that the vast majority of Continental refugees in 1914–18 stemmed from Belgium, a country whose low-lying and watery lands had become an ever-moving battleground.14 The foreign ways of the Belgians, their alleged low standards of hygiene and supposed indiscipline were not remembered with fondness in 1940 when Britain again welcomed Europe’s ‘unwanted’, although the swift advance of Hitler’s armies ensured that their numbers (perhaps 20,000) were never as great as in 1914 when some 250,000 had taken refuge in the British Isles. This was the largest influx of foreigners into the UK since the 1790s, and many had to be housed in religious houses of Southern Ireland. Initially, the French government had only been too happy that such displaced persons should be dispatched across the Channel, yet already by 1915 the strains of war meant that Belgians were a welcome addition to the French workforce.15 At the start of the First World War, Joffre’s ability, or luck, in holding the Germans at the Marne, enabled the mass of France’s own refugees to retreat into metropolitan territory where they were at least among their countryfolk; negligible numbers came to Britain. The withdrawal inland was imitated by their government, which set up a
temporary home at Bordeaux in 1914, the resting place for some ministries for the duration of the war.

In the summer of 1940, France once again became a country of entrances and exits. On 10 May, German forces, having conquered much of eastern Europe, turned westwards and began their simultaneous assault on Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg. Their advance was so fast that they soon reached Sedan, the cornerstone of French defences, which fell on 13 May. Two days later, the Dutch army surrendered; within a fortnight, the Belgians had followed suit. On 28 May, trapped by the German manoeuvre, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) started the evacuation from the beaches of Dunkirk, accompanied by bedraggled elements of the French army. As the soldiers retreated, the politicians also departed. On 10 June, the same day as an opportunist Mussolini entered the war against France, Reynaud’s government left Paris for Bordeaux. Holding a series of makeshift meetings along the châteaux of the Loire valley, on 11–13 June, the French Cabinet discussed whether to leave and fight on from North Africa or to sue for an armistice, an option favoured by General Weygand, Gamelin’s recent replacement as commander-in-chief, and Marshal Pétain, who had been appointed deputy prime minister on 18 May in a desperate attempt to shore up morale. On 16 June, two days after the Germans occupied Paris, the government reached Bordeaux where a dispirited Reynaud resigned and recommended Pétain as his successor. The next day, this ancient soldier, some eighty-four years of age and best known for his victory at Verdun in 1916, announced to a stunned nation that he was in the process of negotiating an armistice. Signed on 23 June, the terms of this agreement divided France into two principal zones, the larger area comprising the northern and western territories, which were to be occupied by the Germans. Still in flight, the French government eventually retired to the little spa town of Vichy, often likened to an English Harrogate, Cheltenham or Tunbridge Wells, where on 10 July the National Assembly voted itself out of existence and granted full powers to Pétain. Politically ambitious and naive of true German intentions, he quickly used his new-found authority to promote a policy of collaboration abroad and a reactionary programme of renewal at home. Few dared defy the leadership of this old man whose patriotism seemed unquestionable. One exception was his former protégé General de Gaulle who, on 5 June, had been appointed under-secretary of war and who, on 17 June, quit France for London in disgust at the Armistice and the defeatism of the
marshal. The day after his arrival, he broadcast to his countrymen on the BBC urging them to continue the fight. 17

In 1940, the success in repeating the retreat to Bordeaux (though not the victory of the Marne) guaranteed that far more French than in 1914 reached the relative safety of Britain, although it should be stressed that most still retreated inland. Some, notably civilians and soldiers, had little choice in their destination, squeezed out at Dunkirk by the pincer-movement of Guderian’s tanks, and ferried across the Channel in the ‘little boats’. Others such as de Gaulle deliberately chose London as it was in the thick of the fighting and the nerve centre of resistance to Nazism. In an interview of October 1990, Maurice Schumann, de Gaulle’s broadcaster, admitted that he was happy in London as he felt he was at the front. 18 As Maurice Agulhon remarks, London was also a place from where radio messages could be transmitted to the Continent. 19 Yet few initially heeded the calls on the BBC; only a handful listened to de Gaulle’s now famous broadcast of 18 June. 20 To the general’s disgust and frustration, several prominent intellectuals who had arrived in London at the same time as himself were soon repacking their bags, destined for the safer shores of North America. It was with some justification that Elizabeth de Miribel acerbically observed, ‘In June 1940 London was not a town where you arrived, but one from which you left.’ 21 Likewise, Ronald Tree, one of Churchill’s close associates, recalls how, in the wake of the fall of Sedan, London University’s Senate House, the wartime home of the Ministry of Information, was deluged with prominent French figures, all desirous to secure passage to New York. 22 And, finally, there were the existing colonists, descendants of Huguenots and nineteenth-century revolutionaries, together with economic immigrants, who looked with sadness and bewilderment at what was happening to their homeland.

The Gaullist legacy

Apart from General de Gaulle and his supporters, who have generated what one historian has described as an ‘intimidating’ literature, 23 those French exiles who sheltered in Britain during the ‘dark years’ of 1940–44 have largely been forgotten by historians. Why this neglect? Part of the answer lies in the fact that the French in wartime Britain constituted a small, self-contained community, or rather communities, who left few traces of their existence, and who were all too eager to return to France, some seeking repatriation while the Germans still

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occupied their lands. When I was engaged in a fruitless search for the papers of a now-disbanded French charity, one archivist in the London Metropolitan Archives compared the French in wartime London to the present-day Chinese community: both sets of people determined to keep themselves to themselves, conscious of their privacy, anxious to assert their independence of spirit, and extremely wary of any meddling from the outside. This might explain why the French remain invisible in social histories of Britain during the Second World War, and earn little more than a footnote in most accounts of wartime London, the city where a majority of them congregated; indeed, they are hidden in most survey histories of the capital. Piecing together fragments of the lives of these exiles was thus no easy matter, with sources elusive and scattered in out-of-the-way places; those scraps of evidence that do survive often pertain to such mundane matters as billeting allowances and unemployment relief, testimony to the prudent housekeeping and Victorian spirit of self-help that pervaded the British state at war.

It is also apparent that the French have been overshadowed by other more prominent groups of foreigners who arrived in wartime: Jews, Germans and American GIs. The abominations that were perpetrated in the death camps of central and eastern Europe have rightly focused attention on what Britain, and France, could have done for the victims of Nazi persecution in 1939–45. Far more is surely the answer. Attention has also centred on those politically suspect groups whose loyalty was called into question in 1940. Italian economic immigrants, long settled in this country and well integrated into London life, found themselves serving espressos in Soho coffee bars one minute and brewing tea in rusty canteens in an Isle of Man internment camp the next. German arrivals in the 1930s fared no better, becoming immediate objects of suspicion, even if they had originally fled their homeland to escape Nazi racial persecution. And, of course, there were the Allies, principally the Americans, who, in the so-called ‘friendly invasion’, brought with them hope, fresh faces, nylon stockings, cigarettes and candy bars, leaving behind plenty of women holding unwanted babies. By contrast, French exiles never had the same impact on British culture, although outraged citizens in the garrison towns of Camberley and Aldershot complained bitterly about the loose morals and libidinous behaviour of Gaullist troops stationed there, reflecting the widely held notion that French men were sexual athletes ready to prey on the virtuous womanhood of Albion. Gender issues aside, the
reasons why the French had such a minimal impact on British culture are not hard to fathom: their numbers were small, especially compared to the Americans; their traditions were different; and, ultimately, they were dependent on their British hosts for virtually everything. Tereska Torrèrs, who at nineteen took the brave decision to quit her homeland in order to enrol in the Corps Féminin des Forces Françaises Libres, the women’s wing of La France Libre, relates how she and her colleagues wore British uniforms until these were distinguished by the addition of French insignia, thus providing a separate identity.30

It is also possible that French exiles in Britain have been neglected in favour of their cousins in North America. The French communities in the USA and Canada, especially, were always much larger than their counterparts in London. It is calculated that, in 1939, the French-speaking population in the USA was approximately 1,400,000, the majority being of Canadian or Louisiana extraction. Some 30,000 French expatriates were located in Washington and New York alone; London could boast no more than 7,000 colons. Given these numbers, it was inevitable that the American French communities took a keen interest in what was happening to their compatriots over the Atlantic. As de Miribel remarked, the safety of American shores ensured that their numbers were further swelled by many prominent politicians and artists.31 While George Bernanos, the Catholic author, and Charles Corbin, the former ambassador to Britain, headed for South America, such luminaries as Henri Bernstein, Camille Chautemps, Jules Romain, André Maurois, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean Monnet and Henry Torrèrs, father of Tereska, all took up residence in New York. To be fair to these men, their courage in reaching America was often considerable. Not all of them had quickly forsaken London, expecting Britain to be the next domino to fall in Hitler’s game of conquest. Rather than travelling in relative safety from English ports on board US-registered vessels, their journey often involved a difficult passage through Spain and Portugal, and from Lisbon across treacherous seas to Liberty Island, avoiding German submarines en route as well as the patrols of the Royal Navy, which, in the aftermath of the shelling of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir on 3 July 1940, was prepared to stop, board and sink any craft sailing under the tricolour lest it fell into Hitler’s clutches. Once on American soil, the significant numbers of intellectuals ensured that New York, together with Montréal, became the French cultural capital overseas. London could never make the same claim, this to the disappointment perhaps of British writers such
as Raymond Mortimer, Cyril Connolly, Kathleen Raine and Stephen Spender who, according to Arthur Koestler, suffered from ‘French flu’, all too ready to abandon their normal prudence whenever they saw a line of French verse or prose, especially if it was written by Vercors, André Gide or Louis Aragon.32

While the French in Britain might well have been eclipsed by other groups, de Gaulle at least has attracted intense interest, and herein lies the principal reason why the French communities have been overlooked. All too often, the general and his supporters have been seen as synonymous with all French exiles in London. This tendency even existed in the war itself. Robert Mengin, a former member of the Mission Naval Française and later a writer for the British-run Resistance journal Courrier de l’Air, remembers how his English friends were extremely perplexed when he explained that he was not a Gaullist. This caused consternation, and a belated and hesitant question as to whether he was a Pétainist. To overcome such social embarrassments, Mengin feigned eccentricity: ‘The easy way was to pass oneself off as a little mad. A touch of madness is quite well considered in England.’33

Although it is not correct to believe French exiles and the Free French were one and the same, such misguided ideas are at least understandable. De Gaulle was a truly remarkable figure whose importance in the history of the Second World War and subsequent evolution of France cannot be overstated.34 In 1940, all the odds appeared stacked against him. Here was a two-star general, the author of some overlooked books on tank warfare, and a minor member of Reynaud’s last Cabinet, who was defying the authority of Marshal Pétain, the most celebrated of France’s soldiers, the ‘Victor of Verdun’, a man whose authority and patriotism seemed unchallengeable.35 Here, too, was a rebellious officer whose claims to incarnate French sovereignty rested on some highly dubious criteria. Although his legal expert René Cassin was soon put to work in demonstrating that it was Vichy that was the unconstitutional regime,36 even the British refused to confer on de Gaulle the status of a leader of a government in exile, merely acknowledging him on 28 June 1940 as the head of the Free French. The general was always reliant on British backing, just as Tereska Torrès was dependent on the British for her uniforms. Initially, this support came from Churchill himself, who was impressed by de Gaulle’s courage and who was eager to rein in the pro-Vichy sympathies of the Foreign Office; later, it was the Foreign Office that became de Gaulle’s principal supporter, keen to dampen Churchill’s enthusiasm for the
Americans. For their part, Roosevelt and the State Department retained an outright hostility to the general, the president being unable to understand how any man could compare himself to Joan of Arc, and being irritated, as Churchill bemoaned, that he could not get his own bishops to burn him. Yet, against these odds, de Gaulle played what few cards he had skilfully, building up his support in the colonies, outwitting potential rivals in the shape of Admiral Muselier and General Giraud, nurturing his contacts with the Resistance in metropolitan France, and retaining an extreme suspicion of both British and American intentions. Such behaviour ensured that, in 1944, he was acknowledged as the undisputed leader of the French Resistance both inside and outside of France, although such status did not ensure the political settlement he craved. For that, he would have to wait until 1958.

Aside from de Gaulle’s obvious political importance, memory has also played its part in the close identification of French exiles with the general. To explain why this is so in the case of the British, it is necessary to reflect on the extraordinary and unpropitious circumstances of June 1940. On his arrival, the general was an ‘unknown’ and received little publicity: his broadcast of 18 June was not widely reported and there was little information readily available on his past. The Times, which on 7 June 1940 had published a short biographical sketch of the new under-secretary of state for war, was one of the few papers to publish his appel in full. Major-General Spears, who became the liaison officer between the British and the Free French, claimed there was only one copy of de Gaulle’s Army of the Future in the War Office whose pages had not even been cut. Churchill was so troubled by this state of affairs that he employed a public relations consultant, Richmond Temple, to boost the general’s appeal, a gesture that led to a deterioration of personal relations between the two leaders. De Gaulle complained bitterly that the prime minister would sell him like a brand of soap, and preferred to keep himself to himself. According to Spears, he regularly used the following phrase in conversation with staff officers, ‘I do not want to be made a film star by the press.’ The historian Douglas Johnson tells the astonishing story of bumping into Geoffrey de Courcel, de Gaulle’s right-hand man who had boarded the same aircraft on 17 June 1940, wandering around Frognal looking for the house in which his hero had once lived, never having visited there during the war.

Yet it remains questionable whether de Gaulle needed to be
marketed by Churchill. The romantic image of this lonely soldier, defying the menace of Nazism and the cowardice of Vichy, appealed to a nation that had few enough heroes at the height of the Blitz. His striking presence, and enormous height, was quickly noted in the streets of London. When one of the characters, the rather seedy and paedophile uncle, in Mary Wesley’s wartime novel *The Camomile Lawn* remarks how he saw de Gaulle that morning, and had saluted him, this was far from fiction. The general was a familiar sight in metropolitan life, and quickly become enmeshed in the British legend of a heroic and steadfast nation determined to resist the German onslaught at whatever cost. ‘Good old de Gaulle’, cried workers when he visited a munitions factory. As the populist newspaper the *Daily Sketch* observed in imagery that might well have appealed to the general himself, ‘He is like Robinson Crusoe washed up on his island and anxious to save as much as possible that may be useful to him.’ Listening in Notting Hill to one of his first broadcasts on the BBC, the nurse and little-known diarist Vere Hodgson noted on 28 June 1940, ‘Magnificent personality he sounds … His voice is thrilling, and his answer made me shiver in my chair. Such tragedy too in his tones.’ Although public opinion was often exasperated by de Gaulle, especially by his high-handed methods and rudeness, which could not always be concealed from the press, and entertained doubts about his political ambitions, it remained impressed by his heroism and determination. The diplomat Harold Nicolson, who himself had despaired at the general’s rudeness in the war, caught this mood perfectly when reviewing the first volume of the *Mémoires de guerre* in 1955 for the *Observer*:

For all his rigid ways his potent nationalism gave him charm. We in this country always have an affection for lost causes and in 1941 the cause of France did in fact seem lost. De Gaulle inspired us with a glow of wonder that he should be positive, that he could lead his people out of the abyss by the force of his dreams and theirs.

Some fifty years after his flight to London, his voice of defiance still echoed. Commemorating the centenary of his birth in 1990, the Institut Charles de Gaulle conducted a *sondage* among the British public. Of those interviewed, the overwhelming majority recalled that he had been the leader of the Free French in London. Far fewer recalled his presidency of the Fifth Republic and, maybe surprisingly in these Eurosceptic times, the fact that he said *non* to Britain’s request to join the Common Market in 1963.
Within France, too, there has been a tendency to view the Free French and French exiles as one and the same. This is understandable given the way in which both Germany and Vichy rigorously censored both press and radio reports and the manner in which the Free French often dominated BBC broadcasts to France, even though the organisation was only supposed to enjoy half-an-hour early evening slots in the schedules.\(^{54}\) It is, though, de Gaulle himself, the supreme myth-maker, who ensured that all French expatriates in Britain were identified with his cause. To admit that he had not been able to win over the entire French community in Britain would have been an admission of failure, and might well have dented his already precarious position yet further. It would certainly have undermined his claims to embody the sovereignty of the French people and the legitimacy of the republican tradition both of which, he argued, Vichy had illegally usurped. He returned to these themes in his memoirs written in the 1950s, a time when he was desperate to keep his political options alive given the difficulties of the Fourth Republic. In recalling how, on 18 June 1940, his ‘irrevocable words flew out upon their way’, urging his countrymen, both on metropolitan and British soil, to join him in London, he readily acknowledges that only ‘isolated volunteers’ reached England: ‘They mostly came from France, brought by the last ships to have left there normally, or escaping in small boats which they had managed to seize, or, again, having with great difficulty got across Spain, evading its police which shut up in the camp at Miranda those it caught.’\(^{55}\) That more did not sail from France, and that many servicemen stranded in England did not rally, are conveniently attributed to Mers-el-Kébir. For de Gaulle, this was ‘a lamentable event’ and ‘a terrible blow for our hopes’.\(^{56}\) Thereafter, he makes little mention of the French community in Britain, other than to imply that he commanded their loyalty, something that was simply not true. Rather, his memoirs emphasise his own role in the Resistance, ‘the man of June Eighteenth’ who, as Henry Rousso writes, personified the sovereignty of the French people and who single-handedly took ‘under his wing’ the forty million French men and women on metropolitan territory, turning them into a ‘nation of resisters’.\(^{57}\) For a set of memoirs written about his time in London, there is remarkably little about the city itself, the manner in which the Free French settled there, and their relations with the British and wider French communities. Just as de Gaulle passes over Jews and Paris collaborators – two other embarrassing groups of his countrymen, albeit embarrassing for different reasons – he largely overlooks the many other French citizens in Britain.
Since the general’s death in 1970, much work has been conducted into disassembling Gaullist ‘resistancialist’ mythology, unveiling the complex nature of the Resistance, both inside and outside of France.\textsuperscript{58} This work has conclusively demonstrated that Vichy was far from being an aberration in French history, as de Gaulle always claimed. Instead, it drew on existing political and ideological traditions, most embarrassingly a potent anti-Semitism, which has recently resurfaced in the shape of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s extreme rightist Front National.\textsuperscript{59} The same research has further demonstrated that the Resistance was princi-
pally the work of a minority; one historian has calculated that the number of active resisters was no more than 400,000, in other words, less than 2 per cent of the population, a claim that will always be impossible to substantiate. The divisions within the Resistance have also been exposed, not just those between de Gaulle and the far left, which the general was all too ready to acknowledge in his attempts to condemn the Communists as revolutionaries, but the deeper personal and ideological clashes that threatened his overall control. That de Gaulle was able to take charge of the transitional government in France in 1944 owed much to his diplomatic and political skills, which had to be at their sharpest in outwitting the Americans who had plans to put their own people into position.

While historians of Vichy France have shown great creativity in developing new lines of enquiry, the one area where they have not displayed the same kind of imagination is in uncovering the life of exiles in Britain. Here, the concerns of scholars have unquestionably been extensive, but they have also been very traditional, focusing largely on diplomacy and high politics, the sort of issues that de Gaulle himself tackles in his memoirs: the uneasy bond between the general and Churchill; the curious triangular relationship that existed between London, the Free French and Vichy; the growth of the Free French movement itself; the squabbles among its leading figures, especially those with Admiral Muselier; the emergence of anti-Gaullism as an intellectual movement; the quarrels over BBC broadcasts to France; the role of intelligence gathering; the power struggle that took place with General Giraud in 1942–43; the ambiguous legacy of Jean Moulin, de Gaulle’s close lieutenant on metropolitan soil and a visitor to England in 1942; and the evolution of the Free/Fighting into an embryonic government, which eventually settled in Algiers rather than in London. Generals, admirals, politicians and professors thus dominate the history of France in Britain to the exclusion of those other émigrés – the refugees, non-Gaullist soldiers, Vichyite officials and colonists, the ‘forgotten French’ – who also sought refuge here in 1940.

**Communities and circumstances**

The aim of this book, then, is not to write another account of La France Libre. Nor is it to recount in detail the quarrels between de Gaulle, the Anglo-Saxons and the Americans. Although this study touches upon the
French intellectual community in London, these men and women also have their historians. Several good accounts on all these issues already exist, and anyone seeking a conspectus on French resistance overseas would be advised to look elsewhere, notably to Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac’s exhaustive and magisterial history of La France Libre, which is broader than its title suggests. The concern of the present book is the ‘forgotten French’: to lift them out of obscurity and to dissect their existence. It would be disingenuous to suggest that these people were politically more important than de Gaulle’s own supporters; this would be to stretch revisionism too far. Nonetheless, the book serves as a corrective in that it displays the majority of French men and women were not enamoured of the general; in many ways, the lure of Pétain was stronger, even across the Channel. Most exiles were embarrassed and confused by the political decisions that they had to make, choices that were shaped by the same factors that confronted their compatriots on occupied metropolitan soil: the exode; defeat; national humiliation; the future place of France in Europe and the world; German repression of relatives, friends and compatriots; and the growth of resistance within France itself. In this way, the book asks many of the questions that historians have recently asked about public behaviour in Vichy France, and it is striking that many of the responses are the same.

The terrible choices and constraints that dominated the lives of the ‘forgotten French’ constitute a central strand of this study, yet the book is as much a social and cultural history of exile as it is a political one. In the social domain, it is interested in the backgrounds of the exiles themselves. Where in France did they come from, and for what reasons did they cross the Channel? How did they survive in Britain? Where did they settle, and why? In cultural terms, it examines how they adapted to a new country, alien customs and a new way of life, one that was being constantly buffeted by the circumstances of conflict. Many felt that they had escaped one war only to discover another, especially at the time of the Luftwaffe’s remorseless pounding of British cities. Refugees, in particular, were resentful that they had been housed in London, which had quickly become the front line. Indeed, the ‘forgotten French’ had to adopt several positions in regard to their hosts; in this regard, the book is not solely concerned with all things French. Throughout, it keeps a close watch on how both the British government and public catered for and responded to these strange communities in their midst, communities that often seemed to be at odds with one another.
The organisation of the book revolves around the dual themes that dominated the lives of the ‘forgotten French’: community and circumstance. In the midst of my research, it became clear that while many of the groups often intermixed – for instance, Gaullist troops sought passport advice from Vichyite consular officials in Bedford Square, intellectuals and refugees rubbed shoulders in Soho restaurants, and servicemen seeking repatriation frequently read anti-Pétainist propaganda devised by the general’s headquarters in Carlton Gardens – they also kept their distance from one another, and retained separate identities. The distinct nature of these communities was reinforced by the manner in which they were catered for. Within a few weeks of the Franco-German Armistice, there existed a wide range of different organisations, British and French, dealing with specific groups. This often resulted in the replication of effort and endless quarrels over responsibility, necessitating the creation of Lord Bessborough’s French Welfare, a sub-committee of the Foreign Office, whose remit was, in large measure, to keep the peace among competing charitable bodies.

Circumstance further helped demarcate these communities. The manner of arrival always overshadowed the lives of the ‘forgotten French’, determined their futures and curtailed their choices. Refugees could never escape the fact that they had been forced to flee their homes, and had been pushed towards the Channel. Most had come to Britain not out of design – out of a wish to fight on, whether with de Gaulle or the British – but by chance, without money, friends and English contacts. So it is that an initial chapter examines the ‘misfortune’ of exile, the pitiful story of the 3,500 French refugees whose lives were dominated by hardship, sorrow and alienation. The ensuing chapter investigates ‘the conflict of exile’: the experiences of those soldiers and sailors who were marooned in Britain at the time of the Armistice and Mers-el-Kébir. These comprised some 2,500 wounded soldiers, convalescing at Crystal Palace and White City, approximately 100 merchant seamen, also at Crystal Palace, and some 6,500 sailors billeted in makeshift barracks-cum-detention centres, located well away from London, generally in the Midlands and north of the country: Aintree, Haydock, Arrowe Park, Trentham Park, Dodgington, Oulton Park and Barmouth. The ‘conflict’ of their exile was whether to fight on, either alongside de Gaulle or the British, or to opt for repatriation. While the Free French expended much energy proselytising among these troops, the British authorities were less anxious to recruit their services, fearful that they might prove to be fifth columnists or
Figure 2  Carlton Gardens, the headquarters of the Free French
German spies. The allegiance of the many French communities was always in question. To whom did they owe their loyalty? To Pétain? To de Gaulle? To the British? To Vichy? To General Weygand who, in September 1940, became High Commissioner in North Africa and distanced himself from the policy of collaboration that the marshal was pursuing with Berlin?74

Such dilemmas ensured that both the British and the Gaullists kept a close watch on the French communities in Britain, on the scent for any whiff of treachery. In the event, fifth columnists never formed a significant, or readily identifiable community, yet it is clear that they gravitated to one group of men and women who did: the Vichy consuls and legations, which had been left in Britain at the time of the Armistice. Although Britain had cut off diplomatic relations with Vichy, it permitted a skeleton consular staff to remain in order to handle administrative matters and to tidy up the economic agreements that had been concluded between London and Paris in the course of the war. The lives of these men and women constitute a third chapter – ‘the surveillance of exile’. The remaining chapter focuses on the French community in Britain.75 As already noted, in 1914 this community was the third largest European immigrant group in Britain, numbering approximately 30,000. The call-up of French nationals into the army in 1939 reduced numbers to around 12,000, 7,000 of whom lived in London; the remainder were largely concentrated in the Home Counties. Even so, they still ranked as a significant immigrant group and were naturally perplexed about what was happening across the Channel. Some might have wished to keep their heads down, adopting an *attentiste*, or wait-and-see approach. Yet this was not possible. It was inevitable that the new arrivals would seek out their countryfolk, if only as a point of reference in a strange land that observed curious habits. Driving on the left, orderly queues at the bus stop, the totality of the blackouts, the good manners of London motorists who observed traffic lights even during a bombing raid, and the mysteries of the Underground – these were all unfamiliar sights to the exiles and required explaining.76 Moreover, it was inevitable that the more politically active exiles would attempt to mobilise the support of the colonists. Significantly, intellectual exiles would quickly integrate with the colonists, often making it difficult to distinguish them apart. The British also kept an eye on these colonists and, although it was quickly decided that they did not pose any real threat, the deterioration of London-Vichy relations during 1941 brought with it the prospect of general internment.

Misfortune, conflict, surveillance and tradition: these, then, were the
circumstances in which the communities of the ‘forgotten French’ – refugees, servicemen, Vichyite officials and colonists – lived, worked, talked, dined and argued, never quite able to patch up their differences, thus presenting an elaborate mosaic of responses to the war, responses that echoed positions adopted on metropolitan soil, although, Britain, unlike their homeland, never became subject to the jackboot.

Piecing together the fragments

Overlooked by historians, eclipsed by other exile communities and dwarfed by Gaullist mythology, the literature that touches on the lives of the ‘forgotten French’ does not take long to survey. Admittedly, there are titles that promise much, notably Pierre Accoce’s Les Français à Londres and Jean-Paul and Michèle Cointet’s La France à Londres, yet the former is more or less another history of the Free French, de Gaulle appearing on every page, while the latter concentrates on the reconstruction of the French state abroad, a process that, once again, came to be dominated by the Gaullists. A broader picture is drawn in André Gillois’s Histoire secrète des français à Londres, one of those books that sits awkwardly on the cusp of being both a primary and secondary source. Having helped coordinate the efforts of the three principal partisan movements in the unoccupied zone – Combat, Libération Sud and Franc-Tireur – Gillois fled to Britain in 1942, and his work stands almost as a memoir of these momentous times. Yet having arrived late in the day, Gillois was forced to recreate the atmosphere and events of 1940–41. In the words of Emile Delavenay, a journalist working for the BBC and a resident in London throughout the war, the book is thus, ‘un ramassis de rapports, rapportés sans le moindre sens de la critique historique’. This reservation aside, Gillois still dwells on the high politics and the key personalities of the day, saying little about the everyday experience and culture of exile.

This, then, is a study assembled almost entirely from primary sources. Just as virtually every member of the Pétain Cabinet chose to make public their recollections of the Occupation, most prominent exiles, both Gaullist and anti-Gaullist – Jacques Soustelle, René Cassin, Maurice Schumann, Jean-Pierre Bloch, François Coulet, Elizabeth de Miribel, Robert Mengin, to name but a few – have all left their memoirs. While these allude to some of the experiences of exile, they are, for the most part, the stories of an educated and articulate elite, newly arrived in Britain. Hence, they focus principally on high politics.
and the wider events of the war; de Gaulle often constitutes the context in which they articulate their memory. An exception to this pattern are the articles that Georges Blond wrote for the collaborationist newspaper, *Je Suis Partout*, and that were collected together in his *L’Angleterre en guerre. Récit d’un marin français* published in both French and German during 1941. A naval engineer, an ardent Anglophobe and associate of Robert Brasillach, in 1940 he was interned in Britain along with other French sailors and did not hide his disgust at the manner in which he was treated. Repatriated to France, he made his mark as a right-wing journalist, was sentenced to ‘dégradation nationale’ in 1949, before resuming his literary career in the 1950s, writing an apologia for Marshal Pétain in 1966.

Given the limitation of memoirs, wherever possible this study has drawn on unpublished diaries of lesser-known figures, together with interviews conducted among former exiles and their British associates. Newspapers also proved of value, not so much the British press, but the many French journals that sprang up in London. For the most part, British journalism provides few clues to the fact that not all French expatriates were supporters of de Gaulle, the obvious exception being the *Observer*. Under the proprietorship of the Astor family, who had enjoyed close contact with the French ever since June 1940 when large numbers of sailors disembarked at Portsmouth where Lord Astor was mayor, in 1943 the *Observer* launched a strenuous campaign against the authoritarian tendencies of the general, siding with the anti-Gaulist intellectuals who were making similar complaints in London. Among the French journals, which often ran off the Fleet Street presses, the newspaper *France* was widely perceived as a piece of Ministry of Information propaganda, and contains little other than reporting of events in occupied Europe, while *La Marseillaise* peddled the Gaullist line, supplemented by *Les Documents*, which drew together the general’s speeches and proclamations. Of greater value for this particular study was *La France Libre*, the journal of André Labarthe and Raymond Aron (not a Gaullist publication despite its title), which reveals something about the social and political conditions of life in exile, providing helpful information about British customs and traditions, for instance how the London pub differed from the Paris café. It is a pity these essays are few and far between. Labarthe himself, however, bitterly complained that he received far too many articles from the French colony in London – cooks, hairdressers and the like – who were eager to recount their personal experiences of wartime rather
than getting down to the real business of attacking Vichy and debating schemes for post-war renewal.84

The bulk of the material, however, has emanated from archival sources, materials to be found chiefly in Britain rather than in France or in Germany. Given MI5 and Free French concerns that Vichy consuls in Britain were secreting information out of the country to both Berlin and the Pétain regime, use was made of the surviving files of the Buro des Staatssekretars of the German Foreign Office, as well as reports emanating from the German embassy in Paris. The documents selected dealt with Franco-British negotiations, yet nothing came to light to substantiate the spying allegations, although this is not to say that evidence cannot be found elsewhere in the enormous bureaucracy of the Nazi state. Papers pertaining to the Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, held both in Nantes and in Paris, were also consulted, but these largely dealt with the pre-1940 period. Having, in an earlier study, perused the personal fonds of the prominent Socialist exile André Philip, it was tempting to go through the voluminous archives privées of prominent Free French officials and other noted exiles based in London, but this would have resulted in me writing a very different book, the focus shifting immediately to high politics and matters Gaullist. In Britain, too, I wished to avoid an over-reliance on the papers of ‘les grands et les bons’; yet with an empty hour to fill in a particular depot, it was difficult to resist ordering materials of individuals who seemingly had little connection with the ‘forgotten French’. For instance, at Churchill College, Cambridge, I unexpectedly uncovered a good deal about refugees and soldiers in the personal letters of the then Labour MP for Derby, Philip Noel Baker, later the minister Lord Noel Baker, information that proved far more helpful to this particular study than that on the Special Operations Executive (SOE) preserved in Hugh Dalton’s archive at the London School of Economics. Among private documentation, it was unquestionably the Spears material at Churchill and the Astor Papers, held at Reading University Archives, that proved most revealing.

For the most part, this book utilised holdings not normally associated in any shape or form with French history. Olive Anderson, in her research into British social history, once remarked that she had deployed a highly unusual reference work in the shape of the London Yellow Pages when tracking down the location of nineteenth-century pubs in the capital. This study cannot claim to have shown quite the same initiative, but it did delve in several nooks and crannies. Much on
the lives of servicemen, refugees and expatriates was gleaned from the holdings of the London Metropolitan Archives, Westminster Diocesan Archives, Mass-Observation Archives, Reading University Archives and the Women’s Royal Voluntary Service Archives, which, at the time of researching, were housed in a Pickfords depot outside Wallingford, Oxfordshire, interestingly a place de Gaulle himself travelled and where Free French troops went for picnics by the Thames. The BBC Written Archives at nearby Caversham were also visited, although arguments about BBC broadcasts to France largely concerned newly arrived intellectuals and Gaulists, not the ‘forgotten French’. While the world of broadcasting to both France and Europe still requires further attention, it does not figure prominently in this particular study.

Of most use were the copious holdings of the Public Records Office at Kew. In line with most other authors who have written about de Gaulle, I made much of the General Correspondence (France) of the Foreign Office, series FO 371. Although not always well catalogued, this critical source unveiled much about British policy towards the French in this country, as well as revealing much about the day-to-day existence of refugees and others. FO 371 also contains the important minutes of the Committee on Foreign (Allied) Resistance, which met throughout the period 1940–42 and which reported directly to the War Cabinet. The CFR had begun life as the Vansittart Committee, an inter-departmental committee created at the time of the Armistice, whose remit was to look into all matters French. Conducting some twenty-two meetings between 21 June and 8 July 1940, this committee, initially comprising Vansittart, Spears, Morton and the Foreign Office apparatchiks Strang and Speaight, became so unwieldy that something more formal was required, and hence the CFR was born. Keeping an extremely close watch on the activities of French exiles in Britain, in April 1942 the CFR was retitled the Committee on French Resistance, looking at the wider developments in Syria, North Africa and elsewhere. It is at this point that the minutes become less helpful for this particular study, although by 1941 it was already the case that more attention was being devoted to matters overseas than to developments within the French communities in Britain. Nonetheless, the material was certainly sensitive, and an unholy row broke out in 1941 when one of Spears’s entourage absent-mindedly left a copy of CFR minutes in the smoking room of the Air Force Club.

Also of value were two other series that have largely been overlooked in previous studies of wartime France. FO 1055 contains the papers of...
Lord Bessborough’s Committee on French Welfare. It is a pity that, at some point, these papers have been carefully weeded, leaving material pertaining essentially to servicemen and refugees. This is why the Home Office Aliens Department series, HO 213, proved of such worth; maybe it was unexpected that a historian of wartime France would take much interest in nationality files, buried amid applications for naturalisations and arguments over work permits. Yet here were discovered detailed records of the numbers of French in Britain, important as the national census scheduled to take place in 1941 was cancelled because of the war. It would be myopic to cite all the other PRO series consulted during this study. A full listing of all these papers, together with other archival depots, is to be found in the bibliography.

Tentative conclusions

On 1 January 1940, R. E. Balfour, a leading member of the Ministry of Information’s Foreign Publicity Department, in liaison with the British embassy in Paris and the Commissariat Général à l’Information, drew up a very full report on the press reporting of the Franco-British war effort and how this should be conducted. In this, he observed:

For as long as we can foresee, England and France will be bound together. We are nations of very different temperament, we do not easily understand each other, and we often disagree. It is safe to say that the ordinary Englishman with a slight knowledge of the Continent finds the Germans easier to get on with than the French. It is only those who have time and opportunity for lengthy travel or residence abroad who discover that deeper acquaintance with the two nations reverses the position; it reveals the deep cleavage between the English and German mentality, despite their superficial resemblance, and it shows how the English and French so different in everyday life and in apparent approach, do believe in the same fundamental values.89

Predicting an Allied victory, Balfour could not have foreseen how his observations would be put to the test by the enforced residence of thousands of French men, women and children in Britain. That these people retained an anathema for Nazi values cannot be doubted. As the war dragged on, their hostility towards Vichy also became readily apparent, although a lingering respect for Pétain endured, just as it did in metropolitan France where public opinion quickly distinguished between the marshal and his government. Indeed, the story of the ‘forgotten French’ is not a edifying tale of a heroic people, embracing
the Republican tradition, to defy both Vichy and the German occupier by deliberately choosing to continue the struggle from abroad, from the one European country that had not fallen prey to Hitler’s insatiable greed and ambition. Most of the French in Britain, with the exception of the colons, were there by chance, not by design, and were not wholly convinced that they should stay. While some were undeniably courageous in their opposition to Vichy and Hitlerism, the majority adopted a variety of positions; few initially were Gaullist. Only when the war looked truly won did they begin to rally around the general, and even then doubts remained. Yet if the ‘forgotten French’ do not emerge from this study with their reputations unscathed, neither do the British. While many ordinary people were generous in the help and sympathy they extended to refugees and other exiles, government officials could often be uncaring and critical, unable to understand the culture of another people and unable to hide their prejudices, prejudices that had been hardened by the bitter political squabbles that had broken out among the French themselves.

This, then is the history of the ‘forgotten French’. It is a tale of several communities: communities that struggled to acclimatise to life abroad; communities that kept their distance from one another; communities that were often internally divided; and communities that frequently exasperated, irritated and bemused the British government and public.

Notes


2 Most of these examples of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century exiles have been taken from J.-A. Lesourd, ‘Refugees, exiles, émigrés’, in D. Johnson, F. Bédarida and F. Crouzet (eds), Britain and France. Ten Centuries (Folkestone, Dawson, 1980), pp. 117–29. See, too, the accompanying essay by Maurice Hutt on British emigration to France, which was never of the same intensity (pp. 130–6).


4 I am grateful to Michael Biddiss for this quotation.
6 Carpenter and Mansel, French Emigrés, p. 179.
10 Among the many works on Zola, see F. Brown, Zola. A Life (New York, Macmillan, 1996).
14 See P. Cahalan, Belgian Refugee Relief in England during the Great War (New York/London, Garland, 1982).
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24 On this point, it is worth comparing the reasons why the Belgians in the First World War have been overlooked. See Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, p. 2 et seq.


29 Public Records Office (hereafter PRO) FO 1055 1, letter of Jean Hesse, Amis des Volontaires Français, to Lord Bessborough, 29 May 1941, to which are attached several reports on the Free French at Camberley.


35 On the Pétain myth, see especially P. Servent, *Verdun, ou le mythe des tranchées* (Paris, Payot, 1988).


40 The *Times*, 7 June and 19 June 1940. The *Daily Telegraph* of 19 June published the text of his broadcast beneath the uninspiring headline, ‘Call
by French General’.
41 PRO FO 371 24346 C13242/7328/17, Memorandum by Major-General Spears, late autumn 1940.
42 PRO FO 371 24340 C8211/7328/17, note by Richmond Temple, 24 September 1940.
44 Churchill College Cambridge (hereafter CCC) SPRS 1/134, ‘General de Gaulle: The Man’, by Spears, n.d., in which Spears also remarks that de Gaulle was reticent about his family.
48 Daily Sketch, 25 June 1940.
50 See Mass-Observation (hereafter M-O) FR 541, ‘December 1940: Feelings about various racial groups’.
52 CCC SPRS 1/137, press cutting from the Observer, 30 October 1955.
56 Ibid.
58 On the historiography of the regime, see S. Fishman et al. (eds), France at War. Vichy and the Historians (New York, Berg, 2000), which also demonstrates the current concerns of historians.


65 See Aglion, De Gaulle et Roosevelt, and Maguire, Anglo-American Relations with the Free French.


72 Crémieux-Brilhac, La France Libre.


74 It is now known that Weygand was, in no sense, preparing the French army in North Africa for a possible conflict with Germany, despite the sympathetic portrayal of the general in the most recent biography, B. Destremau, Weygand (Paris, Perrin, 1989). See C. Levisse-Touzé, L’Afrique du Nord dans la guerre, 1939–1945 (Paris, Albin Michel, 1998) for a more rounded view.
75 There is virtually no literature whatsoever on the French colony. It is telling that the most recent studies are R. Faber, *French and English* (London, Hutchinson, 1925), H. Goiran, *Les Français à Londres. Etude historique, 1544–1933* (Pornic, Editions de la Vague, 1933) and G. R. Sims (ed.), *Living London* (London, Cassell, 1901) 3 vols. Some further information may be gleaned from P. Morand, *Londres* (Paris, Plon, 1933). An influential author, in 1940 Morand chose the path of active collaboration rather than a return to London where he had spent a considerable time as a journalist. Fortunately, some of the gaps in the literature on French expatriates are being filled by Fraser Reavell in a University of Reading Ph.D. thesis entitled ‘French Exiles in Britain during the Third Republic, 1870–1914’.


80 See the bibliography for full details.


83 See the article on ‘Angleterre’, by A. Cohen in *FL*, vol. 2, no. 8, 20 June 1941, pp. 114–23, for instance.

84 Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM) 63/34/1, diary of M.-L. Touchard.

85 PRO FO 371 31936 Z73/73/17, Minute of 11 December 1941.

86 CCC SPRS 1/136, Vansittart Committee, ‘Terms of Reference’, no date (June/July 1940?).

87 PRO FO 371 31936 Z73/73/17, Minute of 11 December 1941.

88 CCC SPRS 1/137, various correspondence of January 1941.