

# Why France fears Klaus Barbie

**K**laus Barbie, known as "The Butcher of Lyon," went on trial this week for crimes against humanity. Why, I wondered, was this former Gestapo officer, the very man who had tortured French Resistance agents and deported Jewish children to death camps, smiling? The answer, I believe, is because Barbie knew full well that his show trial was as much a trial for France itself.

The Barbie trial will directly assault one of the great myths of our age: That the evil Adolf Hitler dragged an innocent Europe into a war no one wanted. What the trial is likely to reveal is that more Europeans favored Hitler than opposed him — and not the least in France.

When France declared war on Germany in 1939, it was a nation already bitterly divided for 70 years into mutually hating left and right. To Frenchmen of the right, the real danger was not a resurgent Germany but their own Popular Front government and its backer, Russia. French conservatives claimed that the Popular Front was "a monstrous alliance of fanatic communists, Masonic radicalism and Jewish finance." In their view, a war with Germany would end up destroying western power and making Stalin's Russia master of part of Europe.

No wonder, then, that the rightist Vichy regime that emerged out of France's swift military defeat was generally pro-German. Under Vichy, French anti-Semitism, never far below the surface, surfaced with ferocious intensity. Communism and the Jews, in the French view, were one and the same. By October, 1940, anti-Semitic statutes were being promulgated into law —



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long before the Nazis put any pressure on France to do so. Traditional French hatred of England quickly came to replace anti-German feeling, particularly after the Royal Navy sank part of the French fleet when it refused to surrender.

Today, most French still believe the myth that the nation, aside from a few despicable traitors, rose up in the Resistance to oppose the Germans. The Barbie trial should elucidate the interesting fact that at the height of Resistance activities, no more than 2% of the adult French population was in the Maquis. In truth, more Frenchmen served in the Gestapo and its auxiliary arm, the 45,000-man "milice," than in the much ballyhooed Resistance.

The trial may also bring out the embarrassing fact that the French rounded up more Jews in France than did the Germans, though of the 80,000 or so Jews deported to death camps, the majority were from other European nations. Still, France's hands are far from clean. Even the fascists in Italy — who generally managed to avoid deporting Jews — were shocked by the ruthless way the Vichy regime hunted down French Jews.

Just as many Frenchmen felt themselves to be logical

allies with Germany against a rapacious England and a menacing Russia, so Europeans of other nationalities saw Germany as their savior against the far greater Soviet threat. In the early 1940s, few knew of Hitler's death camps and less cared about the fate of the Jews. But word was leaking out about the abominable crimes of the Soviet Union, of Stalin's purges that had murdered 12 million Soviets and Ukrainians.

Large numbers of Frenchmen, Dutch, Belgians, Scandinavians, Spaniards and East Europeans flocked to the German side, the forgotten international brigades of the right. Almost as many French soldiers were killed fighting for Vichy France against the Allies as died fighting against the Germans. In short, a European civil war fought as much for ideological as traditional nationalist motives. A group of hapless nations forced to make the awful choice between Nazis and Bolsheviks.

It's time we face these difficult truths. Out of the trial will come more disturbing questions, such as: Why do we pillory Kurt Waldheim while ignoring the monumentally greater crimes of men still in power in the Soviet Union? Why are not the Butchers of Budapest, of Lwow, of Danzig, of Lublyanka and Kolyma also on trial with the Butcher of Lyon? What also about the French themselves?

Barbie's defence attorney will raise the ghosts of the Algerian Revolution during the 1950s and '60s. Boasting that they had surpassed the Gestapo in efficiency and cruelty, Gen. Massu's French paras routinely used torture to break up the Algerian resistance. Why then is not the Butcher of Algiers also on trial? More cynical smiles are to be expected from Klaus Barbie.