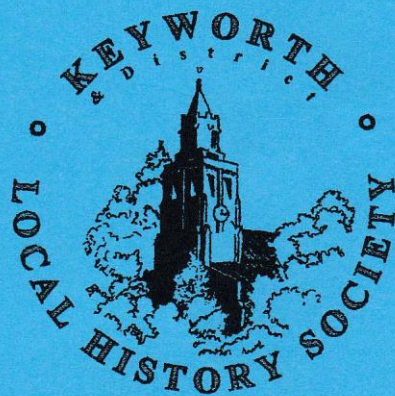


NORTHERN  
OCCUPIED FRANCE



JOHN THELWELL

## NORTHERN OCCUPIED FRANCE

### A. The Area

The areas to be examined are the Departments of Le Nord and Pas de Calais.

Before the 17th century, they had been part of the Spanish Netherlands, but by the 20th Century, the people regarded themselves as French. It was an area which was more anti-German and more inclined to support the Resistance than other parts of France.

During the 19th century the Nord had been heavily industrialised. Coal mining, textiles and engineering became important and Lille, Roubaix, Maubeuge and Douai became centres of working-class movements.

During the First World War Lille was occupied by the Germans. Their rule was harsh. After the war, gaps in the labour force were filled by Poles. The Communist and Socialist parties, plus left-wing Catholics, became prominent and some workers gained military experience by fighting on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War.

**General de Gaulle** was born in Lille in 1890, his father was headmaster of the former Jesuit College in Lille and therefore, the de Gaulles were known locally and this may have played a general part in arranging support for de Gaulle after the surrender of France.

### B. 1939 - 1940

The German invasion of Poland, which started the Second World War, was preceded by a pact between Hitler and Stalin.

This meant that the Communist Party was opposed to the War. The French Government dismissed all Communist mayors and officials and banned the Communist Party. The Communist Party went underground and built up an organisation which was to be an asset when it became involved in the resistance.

The invasion of Poland was followed by the Phoney War which came to an end on Friday 10th May.

The BEF and the French 1st and 7th armies were cut off from the rest of France when the Panzers reached the Channel near Boulogne on 21st May. It was an advance which led to the evacuation of Dunkirk which was completed on 4th June. Yet in those three and a half weeks there was confused and bitter fighting in Northern France. Maubeuge was cut off on 16th May, but the forts held out until 24th May. On 21st May a British counter-attack supported by the French at Arras shook the Germans. The French 1st Army held out at Lille until 31st May and, thereby, diverted German forces from Dunkirk. There were some excesses.

An SS division shot British prisoners at Le Paradis and may have been responsible for the murder of 70 French civilians at Oignies. Around Dunkirk, British and French soldiers threw their weapons into the canals. The future resistance took note and many were recovered to be used later against the Germans.

When the French signed an Armistice at the end of June: the two Northern Departments were separated from France and put under the authority of General Von Falkenhausen in Brussels. This was because of the proposed invasion of Britain from the Pas de Calais in France and the Belgian coast around Ostend.



### C. 1940 - 1941

The Armistice of June 1940 divided French society. Many Frenchmen supported Petain because of his reputation in the First World War. He had defended Verdun and had always been concerned with the lives and welfare of the ordinary French soldier. The German army was well-disciplined and, in the early days, behaved correctly.

The German authorities antagonised the people of Northern France. A clumsy support for union with the Flemings in Belgium antagonised most Frenchmen. The Pas de Calais and Le Nord were expected to feed themselves from their own resources despite being a largely industrial area.

The food shortages led to a miners' strike at Douai in May 1941. At first the Germans, led by General Niehoff in Lille, took a hard line and the strike leaders were arrested and threatened with deportation. In the end the need for coal compelled General Niehoff to back down and release the deportees and grant extra rations to the miners.

Suspicion and dislike of German occupation fuelled by German errors of judgement led to the beginnings of resistance. At first, it was non-violent. Jean Houcke, the Mayor of Nieppe, refused to display Petain's portrait. Catholics and Socialists founded the Voix du Nord, which published news-sheets. Members of Voix du Nord, like the housewife Mme Elaine Meplaux, helped Allied servicemen to escape. By April 1941 anti-German graffiti, like "A Bas les Boches", began to appear on the streets and on public transport in Maubeuge.

### D. 1941 - 1942

In 1941, the Departments of Pas de Calais and Le Nord were returned to France and came under the rule of the Vichy French Government, led by Petain.

Far more important was the German invasion of Russia in June 1941. It meant that the Communist Party, with its efficient underground movement, became part of the Resistance. They founded the "Francs Tireurs et Partisans" (FTP), which were Communist led, but the rank and file came from all persuasions. At first there was little co-operation with other resistance groups.

The FTP specialised in sabotage. In Feignies they sabotaged the Brussels to Paris main line which runs through Feignies. The sabotage led to reprisals and many felt the FTP were too aggressive.

There was a strong anti-Communist movement in France and the Germans exploited this. Members of the Resistance were betrayed and intelligent police work by the Germans led to the arrest of leaders of the Voix du Nord. Among those arrested was Mme Elaine Meplaux, who was later released in 1942.

In 1941, the elimination of the Jewish community began. First they were banned from cafes, then forced to wear the Star of David and finally deported. Some were sheltered by Protestant and Catholic organisations.

#### **E. 1942 - June 1944**

The German defeat at Stalingrad increased the need for foreign workers to go to Germany to produce munitions.

In 1942, Laval, Petain's PM, devised a scheme by which one French prisoner of war would be returned to France in return for three French workers. The scheme was regarded with cynicism by the French and, despite German propaganda, was a failure.

In February 1943 the Germans introduced "Serve du Travail Obligatoire" (STO) by which workers were conscripted to work in Germany or for the Todt organisation, which built fortifications and V1 sites along the Channel coast.

STO created the Maquis. Workers who refused to register went into the countryside and joined the Resistance. Many ordinary citizens became involved in unlawful activities, such as destroying records and issuing false ration cards and identity cards. Many French workers were exempt for bogus medical reasons.

The Germans reacted by cordoning off areas, searching every home and arresting those who should have registered. At 4am on 2nd March 1943, an area of Maubeuge was cordoned off and searched. Those arrested were kept in the "Salles des Fetes" for 3 days without food before being deported to Germany.

Actions like this increased the bitterness against the occupying forces. There were demonstrations on Armistice Day at the War Memorial in Maubeuge when First World War veterans wore their decorations.

The Resistance increased its number of activities. Allied agents were dropped into France to unite the resistance into one body. Arms were parachuted to equip the Resistance and the BBC broadcast every day giving code words for the landing of agents.

De Gaulle was recognised as the leader of France by those who opposed the Germans.

Sabotage increased, especially against railways and telephone cables. Many Resistance members worked for the railways and telephone organisations.

The most spectacular and tragic operation took place at Asq near Lille in April 1944. A train carrying units of the 12th SS Panzer division was derailed. All men in the area were arrested and 86 were shot.

Twenty five thousand people attended the funerals conducted by Cardinal Lienart of Lille.

The two Northern departments suffered from heavy Allied bombing in which more people were killed than by the Germans.

As a prelude to the invasion of Normandy the Allied air forces pounded the railway systems as well as the V1 sites.

Four hundred and fifty were killed in one raid on Lille. The Resistance gave information to the RAF concerning the troop train, but it ran late and 100 were killed in an ordinary passenger train at Aulnoye near Maubeuge. Despite condemnation by the Catholic Bishops, the ordinary people seemed to accept the raids as the price of victory. Allied airmen were buried at night to avoid large crowds of mourners. Over 500 people attended one burial at night in Lille.

#### **F. June - September 1944**

When the Allied invasion of Normandy took place, the Resistance, now known as the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), were instructed to hinder German troop movements by all means. The railway system was rendered unsafe and the FFI blew up ammunition and fuel dumps. They ambushed German forces, but often came off worse against trained German units. The retreating Germans took women as hostages on their tanks and used them to bargain with the Resistance for a free passage.

The most useful role of the Resistance was to guide Allied units and inform them about the position of German units so that British and American tanks and aircraft could deal with them.

Liberation at the beginning of September 1944 was a confused affair. In Lille the FFI rose on 31st August. The Germans took hostages and demanded a free passage out of the city. As the FFI held 500 German prisoners, this was not accepted; British units entered the city on 3rd September.

Feignies was liberated on 2nd September by American tanks advancing far ahead of the supporting infantry. That evening German tanks re-entered Feignies and killed a number of people. A German officer persuaded the German commander to release the hostages because the FFI had treated German prisoners and wounded correctly.



#### G. The Eputation from September 1944.

French society was bitterly divided during the German occupation. The Communists in particular wanted a cleansing of society after the liberation.

To stop unlicensed executions and to prevent France being governed by British and Americans, General De Gaulle appointed regional commissioners to oversee justice.

Some were treated leniently. The Cure of Roumies near Maubeuge had been a Petain supporter and opponent of the Resistance. He was advised to stay indoors.

There was a darker side. A German-speaking Frenchman from Alsace was shot because he had acted as an interpreter for the German army.

In Maubeuge, trial of collaborators took place before a jeering audience of 1500. Three sentenced to death were given prison sentences by De Gaulle. They were later lynched and killed by the crowd.

The Mayor of Maubeuge, after the liberation, was a 25 year old who boasted of having shot collaborators himself. Yet Lt. Hauk, the SS officer responsible for ordering the shooting of the hostages at Ascq, was put on trial in 1949; his death sentence commuted to life imprisonment and he was released to return to Germany in 1957.

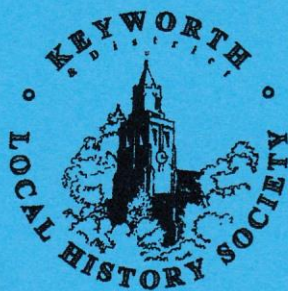
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