
The 1941 Miners Strike in Northern France

From a dispute over soap to armed resistance

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In Northern France in 1941, while under German military occupation, 100,000 miners went on strike from the 27th May to the 9th June. This strike not only cost the German war machine half a million tonnes of coal, but also had long-term consequences for the development of the Resistance in the area. Starting from a dispute with their employers over working conditions, the reality of living under Nazi occupation soon gave the struggle a political dimension, convincing the miners that their social aspirations were inextricably linked to the outcome of the war, thereby preparing the ground for what was to arguably become the most active underground resistance movement in wartime France. In the process of organising and leading the miners' struggles during this period, the local leadership of the Communist Party also realised the untenable nature of their central party line and were well placed to respond to the German invasion of Russia that was to follow a few weeks later.

The strike gives valuable insights into the process whereby workers in struggle under repressive regimes move from industrial action to the armed struggle and parallels miners' actions in the Ludlow and Harlan County strikes in the USA, the Asturian Miners in 1934 and the Bolivian miners in the 1950s.¹

La Zone Interdite

The German invasion of 1940 was not the first that the Nord - Pas-de-Calais, a border area, had suffered, as German soldiers had previously occupied it in 1870 - 71 during the Franco-Prussian War and again in the 1914 - 18 war. During the latter, the Western Front had cut the region in two, the Eastern half suffering a very severe occupation while the Western half had given a warm welcome to British, Canadian and Indian troops. These experiences had seriously affected public opinion in the region, giving rise to strong patriotic and anglophile sentiments, as well as stoking hostile attitudes towards Germany and the Germans. Communist militants were not immune to this popular feeling and were therefore emotionally very much more inclined towards resistance than were Communists in many other areas of France.

The North-eastern corner of France was heavily industrialised with significant textile and metalworking industries and was, above all, the most important mining basin in France, contributing 60% of the national production of coal. A large majority of the population had always voted for the left, and in 1936, the region had given strong support to the government of Leon Blum and the Popular Front. The failure of the Popular Front left a legacy of bitterness between the Socialists and the Communists that would have serious consequences for the development of the Resistance.² The level of industrialisation had attracted large numbers of immigrants, principally from Poland and Italy. While these were officially economic immigrants who had moved to the Nord-Pas-de-Calais to look for work, a large number of the Italians were, in reality, refugees from Mussolini's Fascism and provided a significant number of recruits for the Communist Party. As for the Poles, the war itself had started with the invasion of their homeland in 1939, a fact

¹ YELLEN Samuel, *American Labour Struggles*, Monad Press, New York, 1974

DUNKERLY James, *Rebellion in the Veins*, Verso, London, 1984

² DEJONGHE Etienne et LAURENT Daniel, *Libération du Nord*, Hachette, Paris, 1974 p73

which gave them good reason to dislike the Nazis. These two communities would go on to supply a disproportionately large number of militants for the Resistance and in 1940 entered the period of Nazi occupation with a good idea of the implications of the wave of Fascist dictatorships that had swept over Europe in the preceding decade.³

When the German attack of May 1940 ended the 'Phoney War', the Nord-Pas-de-Calais bore the brunt of the fighting and the local population witnessed massacres of civilians and prisoners as well as suffering considerable damage. The occupation that followed was severe, with the presence of a large number of German troops because of the proximity of the Channel. The Nord-Pas-de-Calais was declared the 'Forbidden Zone' and administered by the military commander of Brussels. The regional administration, based in Lille, was called *Oberfeldkommandantur* (OFK) 670 and operated independently of both Vichy and the German occupation authorities in Paris, being answerable only to the military commander in Brussels, all decrees requiring the counter-signature of General Niehoff, head of OFK 670. Hitler considered the region to be 'Germanic' and, in revenge for the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), had the long-term intention of incorporating it, along with Belgium, into the Greater German Reich, fear of which increased anti-German sentiment in the area.⁴ Because of the fighting at the time of the invasion, a large number of refugees had fled the region and very few were permitted to return as the occupying forces created a demarcation line, roughly following the river Somme, a barrier even more difficult to cross than that separating the occupied north from Vichy France in the south.

The collapse of France in 1940 had occurred much more swiftly than the Germans had dared hope and they were unprepared for their success. Their first reaction was to indulge in simple pillage, but they soon realised that exploitation of France's industrial potential would be more profitable in the long term and of more use to the German war machine. The level of production in the coalmines of Northern France therefore became an important factor in German military thinking. It was in these unfavourable conditions that militants of the French Communist Party (PCF) sought to build their organisation and extend their influence amongst the miners of the region.

Rebuilding the organisation

The Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 had caused considerable confusion in the ranks of the PCF, but the national leadership quickly came round to supporting Stalin's position and professed neutrality between two rival imperialisms. The French government, while still fresh from its own accord with Hitler at Munich, had made good use of the Pact to turn the Communists into scapegoats. Leading members were arrested, the party paper *l'Humanité* was closed and the party itself was banned. In the mining areas of the North-east, the *Préfet* dismissed the Communist trade union delegates and replaced them with Socialist activists and the *Confédération général du travail* (CGT), the main trade union federation, expelled known Communists officials.⁵ The employers took advantage of the situation to sack large numbers of Communists and in one fell swoop the Party lost most of the influence it had gained over the preceding period.

Auguste Lecœur, Félix Cadras et René Camphin, three well known local Communist militants published a leaflet, in the name of the Regional Committee of the PCF, a leaflet justifying the Hitler-Stalin Pact and were arrested for their pains and conscripted into Front Line battalions. When the Germans invaded they were made prisoners of war, but they escaped at the first opportunity, returning to the Pas-de-Calais where they were to play an active role in the Resistance.⁶ At the start of the Occupation, Julien Hapiot, was head of the Young Communists in the Pas-de-Calais. A veteran of the International Brigades in Spain, he was almost the only member of the local leadership still at liberty,

³ OUTARD Philippe & MARCOT François, *Les Étrangers dans la Résistance*, Université de Franche-Comté, Besançon, 1992

⁴ DEJONGHE, E & LE MANIER, Y, *Le Nord-Pas-de-Calais dans la main allemande*, La Voix du Nord, Lille, 2000 p81

⁵ ESTAGER Jacques, *Ami entends-tu*, Editions Sociales, Paris 1984

⁶ PANNEQUIN Roger, *Ami si tu tombes*, Le Sagittaire, Paris, 1976 p40

most of the others being prisoners of war. While waiting for the others to escape, he started to rebuild the underground organisation of the Communist Party as well as '*l'Organisation Spéciale*' (OS), strong-arm squads that had their origins in the need to protect street corner orators and Party officials in the conditions of illegality that had existed since September 1939. The OS was later to grow into the armed wing of the Communist movement.

Within the PCF, there was a difference of emphasis between Paris and the Pas-de-Calais. Guided by the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Paris leadership thought that they had to organise within the context of a German victory. Taking a position of neutrality between what they saw as the rival imperialisms of Germany and Britain, the official publications ignored the German occupation and concentrated their attacks on the Vichy government and French capitalism.⁷ Many of their comrades in the mining basin were convinced, however, that the war would end in revolution, as had happened in Russia after the war of 1914, and that revolution would spring from the ashes of the defeat of German fascism. French capitalism was weak, they argued, the war would weaken it still further until it became merely an adjunct of German capitalism. Julien Hapiot thought that:

'It is much better to shoot the master rather than the dog'.⁸

Many miners of the region had volunteered for the International Brigades and for all the veterans of the Spanish Civil War, there was a feeling that there were still accounts to settle, that they were part of an ongoing struggle.⁹ The isolation of the Forbidden Zone allowed this independence free rein, as communication with Paris was extremely difficult. It is worth noting that the Communists of the neighbouring department of the 'Nord', led by Martha Desrumeaux, in contact with the Comintern representative in Brussels, Eugen Fried, took a much more orthodox position, refraining from overt criticism of the German occupation in their propaganda and concentrating their attacks on Vichy. Eugen Fried believed that the non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR would prevent the occupying forces repressing the Communist Party. Martha Desrumeaux went so far as to request permission from the German authorities to restart legal publication of the local Party journal, *L'Enchaîné du Nord*¹⁰. Having said all this, however, it should not be imagined that the Communists of the Pas-de-Calais were in any way disloyal to their Party, nor that their loyalty to the Soviet Union was not as strong as ever, it was simply that the day-to-day reality in the region pushed them more rapidly towards a more anti-German position than their comrades elsewhere.

Amongst those who fled from the advancing German columns had been most of the elected municipal officials and official trade union leaders, mainly Socialists, members of the SFIO (*Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière*).¹¹ The gap was often filled by Communists who had previously served as elected officials but who had been stripped of their posts by the anti-Communist laws of 1939. Because they needed someone to perform the emergency social work of clearing up after their invasion and, given the national Communist line of ignoring the occupation, the German authorities did not see any danger in tolerating this. The PCF, therefore, started the period with the considerably enhanced reputation of having stayed behind when the traditional leaders had fled to save their own skins.

⁷ For more on the national position of the PCF at the start of the occupation:

NOGUÈRES Henri, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, Laffont, Paris, 1967 (Volume 1)

COURTOIS Stéphane, *Le PCF dans la Guerre*, Editions Ramsay, Paris 1980

TILLON Charles, *On Chantait Rouge*, Laffont, Paris, 1977

⁸ PANNEQUIN Roger, *Ami si tu tombes*, Le Sagittaire, Paris, 1976 p90

⁹ PANNEQUIN Roger, *Ami si tu tombes*, Le Sagittaire, Paris, 1976 p88

¹⁰ ESTAGER Jacques, *Ami entends-tu*, Editions sociales, Paris 1986 p35

Le MANIER, Yves, *Le parti communiste dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais de la crise des années trente à la grève des mineurs de 1941*, Bulletin d'Information MEMOR, no 35, Lille, 2002

¹¹ DEJONGHE, E & LE MANIER, Y, *Le Nord-Pas-de-Calais dans la main allemande*, La Voix du Nord, Lille, 2000 p266-275

The great strike

Despite have placed themselves in an advantageous position, the Communists of the Pas-de-Calais were under no illusion that they could organise unhindered. Generalising on experience gained from persecution by the French state over the previous year, a network of hideouts was arranged, cells started to be organised in the classic 'group of three' format and the OS were enlisted to form a permanent bodyguard for the clandestine leadership.

The major industries in the region were mining, textiles and engineering. Of these, a high level of unemployment amongst textile workers and a fear amongst metalworkers of being deported to work in German factories meant that the mines were the most fertile ground for Communist agitation. The mines were operating full tilt and the working conditions were terrible. Food was scarce and the wages insufficient to supplement the meagre ration by recourse to black market trading. A particular irritation to miners was the shortage of soap.

The miners of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais had gained considerable improvements in working conditions and wage rates through a series of bitter struggles in the twenties and thirties, above all during the strikes and occupations associated with the early days of the Popular Front in 1936. The employers were quick to take advantage of the German invasion and the resulting ban on strikes to reclaim most of these gains. The official trade unions were dominated by SFIO members who were committed to collaboration and were firm supporters of the Vichy government. Realising that nothing could be obtained through these structures, the Communists started to set up unofficial clandestine bodies, *Comités d'unité syndicale et d'action* (CUSA). These quickly spread throughout the mining basin and became the main workers' organisations, leaving the CGT, lead by Priem and Legay, largely irrelevant.

Between August and October 1940, a series of half day strikes broke out. The German military authorities, whose sole interest at this stage was in maintaining production, frequently acted as conciliators between the miners and their employers. Their patience was soon exhausted, however, and when, on the 9th August, a strike took place in fosse 7 of the Dourges company (called *le Dahomy*) to defend Michel Brulé, a Communist militant who had just been dismissed by the company, the Kommandantur of Hénin-Liétard had him arrested. The strike spread to neighbouring pits and the German authorities released Brulé on the 11th. General Niehoff then issued a proclamation on the 14th October threatening to take two hostages per pit in the event of any further trouble and this dampened the situation until the New Year. After discussions with Vichyite officials and OFK 670, the Chamber of Mines ordered an increase of half an hour in the working day and linked future wages to production levels. The miners responded in one pit after another by arriving half an hour late for work and by dawdling over meal breaks. As soon as they were threatened with punishments, the scene of the action would move to another location, the turbulence only ending when lorry loads of German soldiers arrived at any pit taking action and arrested numbers of miners at random.

A spontaneous strike broke out on the 11th November and 35% of miners in the coalfield walked out. Then, demonstrations against food shortages were organised throughout the Nord-Pas-de-Calais between January and May 1941 and these ended in riots in Lens and Avion where the crowd tried to lynch the mayor. Both sides now realised that conflict was inevitable and a six-man squad of Gestapo officers was set up in Lille to draw up, in concert with the employers, the Police and the Gendarmerie, a list of known Communists. For their part, the PCF leadership in the Pas-de-Calais, August Lecoeur and Julien Hapiot, now reinforced by the arrival of Nestor Calonne, mayor of Montigny, newly escaped from POW camp, set about preparing for a confrontation. The clandestine press stepped up its output and the local Communist newspaper, *L'Enchaîné du Pas-de-Calais*, called, on the 22nd of April 1941, for:

'A day of united action against the capitalist exploiters, collaborators and the boches'.¹²

¹² SEGOND Alain, *La Presse Clandestine Communiste*, Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université de Lille 3, 1973

On the Mayday, scores of red flags and tricolours were to be found flying on electric pylons, telegraph poles, pit-head winding gear and many similarly inaccessible places.¹³

After the German invasion, the mining companies took their revenge for the defeats they had suffered in the pre-war struggles with their employees. Without waiting to hear the requirements of the occupation forces, they took no further notice of the Popular Front social legislation and set about restoring 'the taste for work and discipline'.¹⁴ Their attitude may be summed up by a letter from a Lille factory owner to his trade newspaper:

'I would rather see my country occupied by the Germans than my factory occupied by the workers'.¹⁵

The miners knew that, at the time of the Popular Front, many of the company engineers had caused good coal seams to be abandoned and saw how they now rediscovered them for the Germans. The occupation authorities demanded an increase in productivity of 25% over 1938 levels despite the dilapidated state of much of the equipment.¹⁶ The employers cut the piece-rate and the minimum wage while lengthening the working day by half an hour, this in circumstances where, despite the decree of the 28th of June 1940 which froze both wages and prices, there was a very high level of inflation.¹⁷

The strike movement started soon after with spontaneous stoppages in September, October and November 1940. In January 1941, at Pit number 7 of the *Escarpelle* mine, all the mineworkers arrived half an hour late for work. As a result of this action, two Communists were arrested from every pit¹⁸. Traditionally, the overwhelming majority of miners in the Nord/Pas-de-Calais had voted Socialist, but the anti-German sentiments expressed in the local publications of the PCF had won the Communists a great deal of support while many of the old Socialist trade union leaders such as Dumoulin, Legay and Priem had lost credibility as a result of their support for Marshal Petain.

The employers had progressively been introducing new working practices, one pit at a time, throughout the early part of the year. These were based on new team working arrangements and payments by collective results and were bitterly resented by many who lost money thereby. Pit number 7 at Dourges, *le Dahomey*, was probably the most militant in the basin and the company left it until last to introduce its new working pattern. As soon as this happened, on the 26th May, Michel Brulé arranged with his comrades to organise meetings below ground and the strike started on the morning of the 27th.¹⁹ Flying pickets went to neighbouring pits, successfully spreading the strike and a list of grievances was presented to the employer. Surprisingly, the OFK 670 was not informed of the incidents until 5pm that afternoon. Meeting that evening with Michel Brulé, Auguste Lecoœur and Julien Hapiot decided to call for a general strike in the mining basin. The strike movement did not start well, only managing to close the mines in Dourges, Courrières, l'Escarpelle, Ostricourt, Ligny and Anzin by the 29th. This reflected the uneven spread of communist organisation, the dislocation of trade union structures and difficulties in communication caused by the occupation.

Once informed, German reaction was swift, with a number of arrests being made, although they missed all the leaders. General Niehoff, German military commander, had two posters displayed, one calling for an immediate return to work and another announcing that 11 miners and two miner's wives, all Communists, had been condemned to terms

¹³ NOGUÈRES Henri, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, Laffont, Paris, 1967 (Volume 1, p380)

¹⁴ MICHEL Joël, *La mine*, Gallimard, Paris, 1993 p84

¹⁵ Revue du Nord, *L'Occupation en France et en Belgique 1940-44*, No 2 (hors série), Lille, 1988, p746

¹⁶ DEJONGHE, E & LE MANIER, Y, *Le Nord-Pas-de-Calais dans la main allemande*, La Voix du Nord, Lille, 2000 p157

¹⁷ LECŒUR Auguste, *Croix de Guerre pour une Grève*, Plon, Paris, 1972 p45-9

¹⁸ LECŒUR Auguste, *Croix de Guerre pour une Grève*, Plon, Paris, 1972 p58

¹⁹ Interview with Geroges Deroeux, last surviving member of the original strike committee at *le Dahomey*. *Institute d'Histoire sociale de la CGT*.

of hard-labour.²⁰ As a result of these threats, the strike became solid throughout the region, the publicity from the occupying forces helping to overcome the communication problems referred to above. Such a response was by no means guaranteed, but the small scale actions that had occurred in the earlier part of the year had greatly increased confidence. On 2nd June, there were 100,000 miners on strike, 80% of the workforce and a solidarity strike occurred in the Agache factory in Seclin. The lists of grievances emanating from the pits which joined the strike later show an evolution with the demand to release the imprisoned miners assuming an increasing importance.²¹ Strikers from one pit would picket another where they were not known to avoid the risk of denunciation by scabs or informers.²² A group of Polish Communists, led by Rudolf Larysz, organised amongst the Polish miners who represented 29% of the workforce and who, as a result, solidly supported the movement.²³ The French Police were instructed to break the picket lines, but there were not enough of them and large numbers of German soldiers and military police were drafted in to the region, in particular the 16th security regiment, and a state of siege was imposed.

Women increasingly took over picket duty and the hounding of blacklegs. On the 29th, Emilienne Mopty, a miner's wife and PCF member organised a demonstration of 2000 women outside the company offices in Billy-Montigny and, despite being attacked by German *feldgendarmes*, they managed to avoid any arrests by linking arms. Following this and similar demonstrations at Lievin on the 31st and Hénin on the 2nd, the following proclamation was issued, thereby implicitly recognising the important role played by women in the strike organisation:²⁴

'By order of the Oberfeldkommandant, from the 6th of June, women are strictly forbidden to leave their homes in the half-hour before work starts'.²⁵

The level of repression was increased considerably after the 31st May, the police and German soldiers starting a policy of arrests after dawn raids, organised virtually at random to cause the most apprehension amongst the strikers, with immediate drumhead courts martial handing down heavy penalties. Low-level flypasts by the *Luftwaffe* were organised to increase the tension. Bars, cafés and restaurants were closed and the sale of alcohol and tobacco forbidden.²⁶ Despite real hardship and hunger, the strike lasted for the rest of the week, but by Sunday the 8th, enough cracks had started to appear for the CUSA to decide to call for a return to work on Monday the 9th.²⁷ On the 10th, the German soldiers were withdrawn from the pit villages.

Fearful of a repetition, on the 16th June, OFK 670 announced an immediate supplementary distribution of food and set up the *Service d'approvisionnement des Houillères* to organise the distribution of increased rations of food, clothing and soap to mineworkers. On the 17th, the Vichy government decreed a general wage increase for the mines. 460,000 tonnes of coal production were lost and coal had started to run short in Paris, threatening electricity production and causing General von Stüpnagel, military commander of the Paris region to complain bitterly to Brussels. Nevertheless, there was a price to be paid and the employers gave the police the names of those they considered to be

²⁰ Affiche de l'Oberfeldkommandantur 670 de Lille, 3 juin 1941, Musée municipal, Harnes

²¹ Documents Archives départementales du Nord & La Coupoule, Centre d'histoire et de mémoire du Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

²² PANNEQUIN Roger, *Ami si tu tombes*, Le Sagittaire, Paris, 1976 p103

²³ JANINE PONTY - in Revue du Nord, *L'Occupation en France et en Belgique 1940-44 (Tome 2)*, No 2 (hors série), Lille, 1988

²⁴ COTHIAIS-DUMEIX Josette - in Cahiers d'histoire de l'institute de recherches marxistes *Les femmes et la grève des mineurs de mai-juin 1941*, No 47, Paris, 1991

²⁵ LECŒUR Auguste, *Croix de Guerre pour une Grève*, Plon, Paris, 1972g p85 & Document Archives départementales du Nord

²⁶ Affiche de la Kreisekommandantur de Béthune, 5 juin 1941, La Coupoule, Centre d'histoire et de mémoire du Nord-Pas-de-Calais

²⁷ Leaflet issued by CUSA 8th June, Documents Archives départementales du Nord

ringleaders. As a result, 450 arrests were made, of whom 270 were deported to concentration camps in Germany and 130 never returned. Nine communists were taken as hostages and later shot.

Aftermath and implications

Yves Le Maner, director of the *Centre d'histoire et de mémoire du Nord Pas-de-Calais* at St Omer, has argued that the strike escaped from PCF control.²⁸ This is to misunderstand the processes at work in an all-out strike, events that always take on a momentum of their own. It is quite clear that all of the principal leaders of the action were Communists and that they, through the CUSA movement, took all the major decisions from launching the strike, through to deciding when to return to work. What happened in between was a learning process that affected the leadership as much as the rank and file strikers. Although Auguste Lecoœur, Julien Hapiot and their comrades were unhappy with the national line of the party in relation to the German occupation, they had tried to ignore the problem as far as possible.²⁹ Being so forcibly confronted with the German Army, they realised that they could not duck the issue and so, as the strike went on, one can see that the link between national liberation and social liberation becoming more evident in their propaganda. Many ordinary miners were either Socialists or Gaullists and it was necessary to keep them as part of the united front. The political line pushed by the Pas-de-Calais Communists did this very successfully, such that there are accounts of young Gaullist and Socialist militants fly posting Communist material.³⁰ It is interesting to note that it is during this period that the PCF started to raise the slogan calling for a *Front national*.

It is worth re-emphasising that, despite a different approach from the national position, the Communist militants of the Pas-de-Calais were completely loyal to their party, recruited new members on an impressive scale after the strike and many sacrificed their lives in the armed struggle that followed. Auguste Lecoœur was summoned to Paris to become National Organisation Secretary. Julien Hapiot also left the region to become national organiser for the Young Communists, but was captured and executed in Blois in 1943. Michel Brulé went underground to become an armed militant in the OS, he derailed two trains in the immediate aftermath of the strike and robbed a dynamite store. He was betrayed and shot on the 14th of April 1942. Emilienne Mopty was arrested but managed to escape and became a courier for Charles Debarge, probably the most audacious of the Resistance fighters to emerge from the strike. She was captured by the Gestapo and beheaded in Cologne prison in January 1943. When her body was returned to Harnes for burial in 1948, neither of her two sons could be present for the ceremony as they were both in prison for their activities in the 1947 miners' strike.

The main political outcome of the strike was to provide the French Resistance with its most solid base and the repression, which forced a large number of miners into hiding, produced ideal conditions for their recruitment into the OS. The traditional solidarity of the close knit mining communities and the anti-German and anti-employer sentiments generated by the strike enabled these urban guerrillas an unparalleled freedom of movement and support networks. In 1942 and 1943 over half the armed attacks and sabotage in France happened in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

The Soviet Union made a terrible mistake by accepting the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact and did not make sufficient preparations for the German invasion that was to come in 1941. Equally, the national leadership of the PCF did themselves no service by their total support for the pact. The manner in which the Communists in the Pas-de-Calais 'interpreted' the line meant that they were in a much better position to respond to the changing situation, having won the

²⁸ Le Monde, 10-11 June 2001, p12

²⁹ NOGUÈRES Henri, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, Laffont, Paris, 1967 (Volume 1, p383-4)

PANNEQUIN Roger, *Ami si tu tombes*, Le Sagittaire, Paris, 1976 p91

LECOEUR Auguste, *Croix de Guerre pour une Grève*, Plon, Paris, 1972

³⁰ DEJONGHE, E & LE MANIER, Y, *Le Nord-Pas-de-Calais dans la main allemande*, La Voix du Nord, Lille, 2000 p194

leadership of the Resistance in their region. With the German attack on the USSR at 4am on the 22 of June 1941, the situation changed completely for the French Communists and everyone in the Party was pleased to see the back of their previously untenable political position.

Emboldened and politically radicalised by the strike, many of the miners who had gone into hiding began a campaign of sabotage led by militants of the Communist party. At first these attacks had a political motivation, to encourage the local population and to sap the moral of the occupying forces and their collaborationist allies. However, as the war progressed, the economic question became more important. France became by far the most important industrial supplier of the Third Reich and both raw materials and manufactured goods were sent to aid the German war machine. This gave industrial sabotage an increased relevance. The most legendary figure of the resistance in the North was Charles Debarge, a 31 year old Communist miner from Harnes, some 30 kilometres south-west of Lille. Active in the strike and unable to go home, he started a campaign of sabotage immediately after it finished and when he was first arrested in August 1941 he had already blown up two electric pylons and tried to derail a train.³¹ He escaped within a day and increased the level of activity. Initially, Debarge and his comrades used explosives abandoned by the French army during the debacle of 1940, but quickly graduated to stealing dynamite from the pits where they used to work. Thus, for example, on the 3rd of September, Charles Debarge, with 27 colleagues stole 247kg of dynamite and 578 detonators from *la Compagnie des Mines de Drocourt*.³² Even for miners experienced in the use of explosives, the job was never easy and there were many self-inflicted casualties. The help of railwaymen and civil engineers was extremely useful and, in particular, two train drivers from Amiens perfected a method of derailing a train that did the maximum damage to the carriages while giving the driver and fireman the best chance of survival. There is no complete record of the level of economic sabotage undertaken during this period, but one can gain an idea from this record of Debarge's group in the single month of September 1941.³³

On instructions from Paris, the PCF's armed wing, the OS, *Organisation Spéciale*, also engaged in a deliberate policy of killing German soldiers, partly to get weapons and partly to inspire the local population with the sentiment that the Germans were vulnerable. The response of the authorities was to ratchet up the level of repression and most of the resistance workers arrested were shot which, while it provoked outrage amongst the population and provided recruits for the party, had a devastating effect on the organisation itself. By September 1942, the Communist Party's underground organisation had been practically wiped out, with Charles Debarge himself being one of the last to die in a gun battle on September 23rd 1942.³⁴

The underground armed organisation soon recovered, particularly after Roger Pannequin, a young school teacher who had been arrested shortly after the miners strike, escaped from prison and began to build new networks. However the original militants with the experience of the strike were now either dead or in concentration camps and there was no political continuity. The new organisation from early 1943 onwards, now called the *Francs-tireurs et Partisans français*, completely adopted the Popular Front policies of the national leadership of the PCF, stressing national liberation and cross class alliances of 'patriots'. While the demographics of the region meant that the composition of the resistance in the region remained overwhelmingly working class, the base of the movement in the traditional working class political milieu was no longer to be its dominant feature.³⁵ While the national leadership of the

³¹ Carnets de Charles Debarge, cité par FOSSIER Jean-Marie, *Zone Interdite*, Editions Sociales, Paris, 1977 p149

³² PIERRART André & ROUSSEAU Michel, *Eusabio Ferrari*, Editions Syros, Paris, 1980 p146

³³ NOGUÈRES Henri, *Histoire de la Résistance en France*, Laffont, Paris, 1967 tome 2 tome 2 p 132

³⁴ Charles Debarge kept a journal up until the last days before his death at the hands of the French police. A copy may be seen in the *Musée Municipal de Harnes* and it is extensively quoted in:

Claude ANGELI et Paul Gillet RÉMY (éditeur), *La Résistance dans le Nord*, Famot, Genève, 1974p150

³⁵ Interview conducted by the author with Louis Poivre, ancien résistant FTPF de Harnes.

PCF, intent on an alliance with the Gaullists, downplayed the day to day class struggle as a tactic, many individual Communists in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais carried on as normal, leading, amongst other events a strike of 15000 metalworkers in the *basin de la Sambre* in February 1942 and a constant industrial guerrilla war in the locomotive works in the Lille suburb of Fives.

However, the main arena for working class resistance outside of the mines in the North of France was the railways and the complementary role that railway workers and miners have shown in so many places from Bolivia in the 1950s through to the Coalville NUR in 1984-5 was also evident here. The Communists had never had a base amongst the Railway workers of the North, who had remained loyal to their Socialist delegates, above all to Lamand in Lens who in contrast the generally collaborationist outlook of so many Socialist Party mayors and trade union officials, organised an active resistance cell. The role of the railway workers in training miners in the subtle art of train wrecking has already been discussed. They also played a vital role in assuring communications and moving illegal newspapers. During the big miners strike, the railwaymen of Lens had taken solidarity action and they organised their own five day strike in the Lens region in October 1943.³⁶ Their speciality was a more passive resistance, refilling grease boxes with sand and sabotaging the brakes. A group at Bordeaux-la-Bombe, succeeded in hiding from the Germans :100 000 litres of petrol, 100 000 litres of turpentine, 5 000 tonnes of cement', 30 000 square metres of wood, 1 000 tonnes steel, 10 000 litres of glycerine' 20 000 litres of fuel-oil³⁷

But it is the miners again who really relaunched the class struggle into the resistance movement. After the 1941 strike, the skirmishing continued, the disputes centring on the size of the food rations. General discontent and poor diets also produced a deterioration in production levels. Despite an increase in the number of miners from 94,000 in 1939 to 140,000 in 1943, the average daily production dropped from 107,000 tonnes to 87,000 tonnes. As a result of this, the German authorities issued a directive on the 11th of September 1943 that miners would have to work on Sundays. A demand they withdrew after strikes in 11 pits and an enormous increase in absenteeism elsewhere. The occupation authorities and the mine owners repeated their demands on the 8th of October and were met with an immediate strike at Nœux-les-Mines and Bruay German troops occupied the rest of the pitheads with batteries of machine guns as the miners came up that evening. This provoked a strike of 50,000 miners that, despite the arrest of 800 miners, lasted till the 20th with the railway workers from Lens and Bethune coming out in solidarity on the 16th. The threat of Sunday working was withdrawn, a wage rise of 18% was granted and a special issue of clothing and boots was made. All but 156 of the arrested miners were released, although 65 were sent to concentration camps in Germany.³⁸

It is perhaps significant that after this strike there was not the same rush to armed action amongst the miners as during the period following the first dispute. Several factors can be proposed to account for this. Firstly, this strike was undoubtedly a success in economic terms and therefore there was not the same bitterness and frustration that followed the first. Secondly, the armed groups were by now well established and recruitment was better organised and independent of actions such as this strike. And Thirdly, by the end of 1943, the whole course of the war had changed, the USSR had turned the tide after Stalingrad and the United States and Britain were obviously preparing for an invasion. The priorities of resistance were therefore very different and organised preparation for an insurrectionary movement in support of the anticipated Anglo-American invasion became the priority.³⁹

Conclusion

³⁶ DURAND Paul, *La SNCF pendant la Guerre*, PUF, Paris, 1968 p330

³⁷ DURAND Paul, *La SNCF pendant la Guerre*, PUF, Paris, 1968 p331

³⁸ Special edition of '*La Tribune de la Région Minière*' March 1994. A collective effort by members of the mining section of the CGT, coordinated by of Marcel Barrois, editor of the journal.

³⁹ *L'Humanité*, 1st November 1943

The early attempts by Communists in the Pas-de-Calais to pursue the central line of the Party which ignored the German occupation and merely urged a fight against the bosses and the Vichy government proved the bankruptcy of such a position and forced them into the realisation that French capitalism and German Nazism had become two sides of the same coin. Their move into armed resistance was a logical consequence of that understanding. They went into that armed struggle with incredible heroism but inadequate preparation and the resulting death toll did not give them the chance to discover a workable balance between the mass workers struggle and armed actions.

The question of whether the strike was a real act of patriotic Resistance or merely an economic action by miners raising workplace-related demands is a false question that arises out of post-war political considerations. The Communist Party wished to forget that it had had to hurriedly change its line after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The Gaullists liked to continually remind people of this to help hide the fact that, while de Gaulle himself had been very early in his rejection of collaboration, many of his supporters had not come over until very much later, some as late as 1944. Gaullist orthodoxy sees the Resistance in terms of actions undertaken in support of conventional warfare in defence of the pre-existing status quo. However, in organising a strike to resist the employers' offensive in the mines, rather as they might have done in times of peace, the local PCF showed everyone, themselves included, that the defeat of Nazi Germany was an essential prerequisite for any social progress. They thereby started a process that built a Resistance movement in the region that everyone had to recognise as second to none.

Given the overwhelming level of collaboration amongst the French employing class and the way they used the German authorities to repress their employees, rather in the same way as other groups of employers elsewhere used their own native fascist organisations, the social question cannot be disentangled from the national question.⁴⁰ Those who would keep the analysis of the Second World War restricted to a conventional war between two rival power blocks have only understood half the problem. The question of democracy and the struggle against fascism cannot be forgotten as a Nazi German victory would have meant the smashing of all working class organisation and this gave workers on the continent another motivation to resist and also gives the analysis of the war another complication. The collaboration of the employing class gave the war an element of civil war which many commentators wish to forget.

Notes

I would like to thank the Maison Syndicale des Mineurs in Lens and the Municipal Museums in Harnes and Denain for their invaluable and patient help, in particular their assistance in gaining access to archive material. I would also like to thank Monsieur Louis Poivre, *ancien résistant FTPF*, for his help, kindness and hospitality.

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