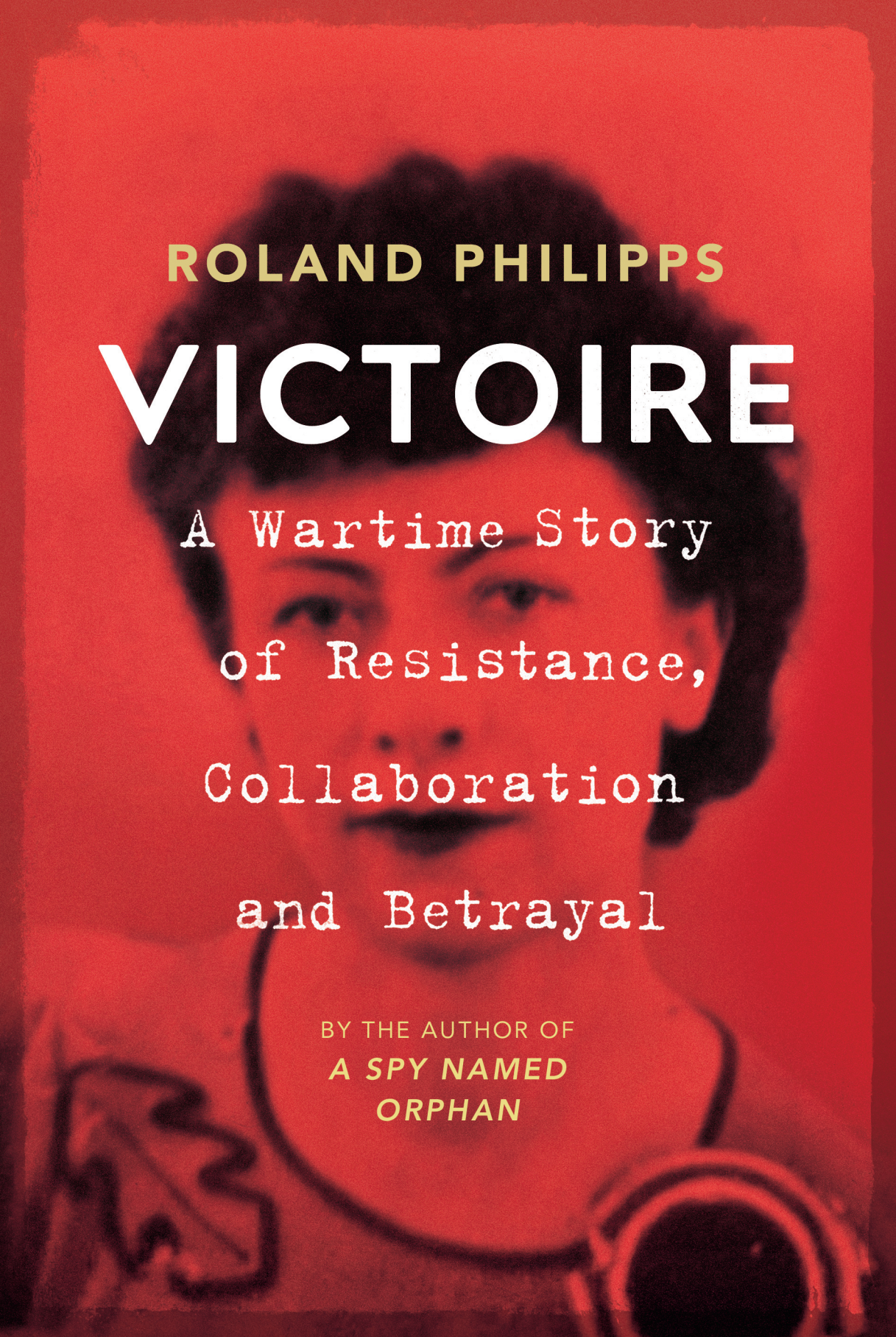
ROLAND PHILIPPS
VICTOIRE
A Wartime Story of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal
BY THE AUTHOR OF
A SPY NAMED ORPHAN

VICTOIRE

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A Spy Named Orphan: The Enigma of Donald Maclean

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ROLAND PHILIPPS

VICTOIRE

A Wartime Story of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal

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Prologue

Moulin-de-la-Rive, Brittany
12th/13th February 1942

The sliver of moon gave almost no light as a Lancashire-born engineer, an aristocratic French Resistance leader, a German military intelligence officer and a short figure in a black fur coat converged on a remote, chilly cove on the north-western edge of Hitler's Fortress Europe. They were awaiting the arrival of a Royal Navy boat to hurry all but one of them across the Channel to England.

The three men were brought together by the only woman of the bizarre party. Her coat that had seen better days and the battered red hat on top of its owner's cropped dark hair did not suit her code name of 'Victoire' as she stumbled myopically along in the darkness. Mathilde Carré's own war had already been eventful, and her impact on the men accompanying her critical. Her current code name was not her first in the twenty months since her country had been humiliated in its armistice with Germany: for one glorious year she had been known as 'La Chatte'.

Were the stakes not so mortally high, the choice of rendezvous might have smacked of that particularly British trait, an ironic sense of humour. Only hours earlier, the mighty battle cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, the pride of the Kriegsmarine, had slipped out of the harbour at Brest and steamed up the English Channel past this cove. Such naval effrontery was only possible because signals from 'The Cattery' transmitted to London on Carré's wavelength had indicated that the ships were 'quite unable to put to sea'. So much faith was put in her intelligence-gathering that this was believed even if other accomplished spies on the ground told a different story. An opportunity had been lost for the

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RAF and the Royal Navy to strike a memorable blow in a low period.

Yet the Cat herself was now being smuggled out of France with the blessing and connivance of the Nazi occupiers of her country, to begin the next stage of a career that remains controversial as questions swirl around her patriotism, honesty and courage.

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A Profound Need

The 'dirty, small black factory town' of Le Creusot in Burgundy where Mathilde-Lucie Belard was born in 1908 could never have nourished a girl with her ardent imagination. She was an advanced, solitary child, able to both walk and talk at the age of one, and spent her early years in the wholesome mountain air of the Haut-Jura in her grandparents' rambling eighteenth-century house with its steeply pitched roof, a paddock and a large garden.

Mathilde's father was an engineer in the steel industry that dominated Le Creusot, and so in love with her assertive mother Jeanne that Lily, as Mathilde was known in her family, believed that their 'amorous intimacy' would have 'disturbed' her even as a baby if they had not sent her to live with her maternal grandfather. She would come to look back on herself as 'a very miniature little lady', and whilst an early lack of parental guidance meant she struggled to parse emotional nuance in herself or read those around her, it instilled a spirited self-determination to try out all that life had to offer.

Her grandfather was an emotionally remote yet 'tender and indulgent' man who slipped Mathilde sugared almonds when she was reprimanded; he was eighty years her senior and shared his house with his spinster daughters, both in their thirties. Aunt Isoline and Aunt Lucie were contrasting and marked influences on their charge's developing character. Aunty 'Tine loved music, a party, stories and clothes, and opened Mathilde's mind to the possibility of a life of romance; Aunty 'Cie, nicknamed 'the Sad One' by her niece, was dutiful, virtuous, and 'a high-minded substitute for a real mother'. Mathilde loved Lucie's balanced calm but would

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share her periodic fits of depression, during which Lucie wrote poems she never dared to offer for publication. One of these involved a stream which Mathilde was told represented 'devotion, patriotism and sacrifice':

> In that desert which is my life
> There flows a charming brook,
> Fragrant with honey and nectar
> In which I have drowned many a regret …

The poem implanted a desire in Mathilde, 'at all costs, to die as a martyr for France', as she was to recall at a time when she was puzzling out the arc of her life. It was the first encapsulation of her romantic sense of her destiny, whose echo was to return to her twenty-six years later at a moment of devastating crisis to rally her innate heroism.

Her earliest memory was of 'weariness, cold sweat and a feeling of nausea'. She was undergoing scarlet fever, and on her recovery was fed a baked apple, the taste of which would instil 'childish joy' for the rest of her life; she could never drink champagne, given as medicine, without bringing her sickness to mind. She could not understand why 'the bells tolling wildly' at the start of the war in 1914 caused her aunts to be so tearful, and was unsure how to behave: all she could think to do was continue with her household duties of making her grandfather's bed and helping with meals. The skill that would be useful to her in the next war – of how to live with secrets whilst putting on a front of normality – was being imprinted early.

Mathilde learned to love nature in this period, and the thought of climbing roses and the scent of flowers was a great solace to her, particularly when she needed the distraction of daydreams, for the rest of her life. Her feeling for the area stayed with her and she knew that she would carry the house's smell and the feel of its rough walls to her grave.

Her independence and sense that she alone could forge her identity were reinforced by the fact that she only moved to live with her

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family, now in a flat in Paris, in 1915, aged seven. She had no clear impressions of her parents or her younger brother, Pierre, before then. Her father was a small man with a black beard who 'looked mild and good' to his watchful daughter. He was in army uniform in her first solid memory of him, on leave from the war in which he was to be awarded the Légion d'Honneur and the Croix de Guerre. Her mother was 'a large lady' in spectacles, perpetually about to 'fly into a passion'. After being the centre of attention in the Haut-Jura, Mathilde felt her parents were 'so in love' with one another that they excluded her from family life and 'explained nothing' to her whilst simultaneously 'reproaching her for being a mediocre pupil'. She was always circumspect with her mother Jeanne Belard and complained about her 'lack of affection', but hardly ever mentioned her father, a shadowy figure who was possibly withdrawn through his experiences in the war.

Despite the help Jeanne later tried to give her daughter at the most tumultuous moments of her life, Mathilde never integrated into her family or found it easy to forge empathetic relationships. Her self-directing streak would be her essential and influential compass in her later adventures, but one that came at the cost of the ability to recognise true attachment to others. At the same time, she was always torn between being engaged with hubbub and community and longing to escape to the peace of a rural existence; and was often at the mercy of events in her immobility between these extremes.

During her frequent stays in the mountains, Mathilde followed the progress of the war on the Sad One's map, and developed a hatred of 'the Prussians' or 'the Boche'. In the quiet environment where feelings were not shown or spoken of, she craved love and fantasised about being a war widow: she had observed that they were 'treated with solicitude, consideration and affection', and did not appear to contemplate the necessary stage prior to widowhood.

She became closer to her brother when they caught whooping cough in 1919 and were quarantined together: it was an experience which inspired her 'fervent wish' to become a nurse, while Pierre

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was determined to be a general. This desire to serve complemented her 'profound need to love and please', her parents remembered. When she did not feel her love was reciprocated she asked to be sent away to school, but the thrill of departure for the Lycée Jeanne d'Arc in Orleans aged twelve soon tipped into despair at her first experience of incarceration: she believed herself unworldly, unpopular and lazy as she lurched from excitement to despair. In her craving for security, she made surprising choices, such as opting to 'remain an old-fashioned woman who knitted and looked after the house' rather than to 'become a modern, active woman' when offered the choice as an essay topic. She drank a bottle of ink in this crisis of identity, which, rather than causing any ill effects, merely turned her tongue blue. The passion that had led her to suicidal thoughts brought her back to the reality of her situation, as it was to do so to vital effect on two occasions in the first years of the Second World War.

*

At the age of sixteen Mathilde moved to a Paris *lycée*, and seized the freedoms of adulthood: she took herself to the art deco elegance of La Coupole for lemonade and to absorb the café's cosmopolitan atmosphere; she applied to sit for artists but at her interview realised that she had not understood 'what kinds of girls painters took for their models'; she met a man in his thirties, Philippe, when she was sightseeing at Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre who loved '*jeunes filles en fleurs*' but 'never kissed' her during the two years of their friendship. He encouraged her to read the radically modern works of Gide, Proust and Cocteau, and disappeared without any explanation from her life just as suddenly as he had entered it.

Following Mathilde's self-reliant upbringing which bypassed many of the usual experiences of childhood, it was perhaps unsurprising that when she gained two further admirers towards the end of her schooldays, they were both older men attracted by her charm and appealing vulnerability. It was as if she wished to accelerate her own steps towards becoming a grown-up and avoid the painful

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business of adolescent dating. Adolphe 'went into raptures over [her] hands, body and eyes', while Louis, the 'saner' of the two, was 'far more attracted to [her] brains and taste'. Both were smitten by her voice, which a later lover described as 'attractive … rather low, but animated; [her] words [were] carefully phrased, cultured'. Her hands were indeed beautifully formed, and her myopic, slightly slanted, gem-like green eyes were compelling, the more so as vanity prevented her wearing her spectacles so that she moved near-hypnotically close in order to see her interlocutor. She was five feet tall, with a thin face, a small mouth and brown hair, and at this point suffered from what she termed a 'violent inferiority complex' from her mother's perceived undermining of her looks, taste and even that she did not 'know how to speak properly'. Her esteem was so low that when she was looking back over the drama of her life she could not recognise her own attributes and assumed that these two men could have been attracted to her only because she was 'irresistibly drawn towards evil'; she assumed herself worthless in the eyes of others. She was horrified when Adolphe pressed his 'bony knee' against her leg under the table at dinner with her parents, and cut him out of her life.

Mathilde failed her baccalaureate at the first attempt in her distraction and had to repeat her last year at school before progressing to the Sorbonne. She studied philosophy but her heart remained with the modern novelists. She always resisted Flaubert, as if Emma Bovary's path through life was some sort of painful premonition of her own search for connection and love. She listened to Bach while the momentous events of the times, the Depression and the rise of fascism, passed her by even as she longed for something to stir her out of her dream state. Another older boyfriend, Robert, owned a car and took her on trips to the Bois de Boulogne and Fontainebleau, as well as to the Louvre most Thursdays. Part of Robert's appeal was that he shared her romantic yearnings as he talked 'of love and of death', and was 'the epitome of dreams and love'; but she found it hard to return his affection amidst her own unfamiliarity with emotion. She was aware of his 'heart beating very fast' as they 'nestled together' companionably, but in response

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felt 'a bitterness' that she could not explain as he tried to draw out her intricately enigmatic personality. She decided that she wanted to follow Robert into studying medicine but her mother forbade it as 'not a suitable study for a well brought up girl' and pushed her towards the law.

At the end of her second year her inability to make the most of her gifts after her lost childhood overwhelmed her: the faltering romance with Robert ended, an arts review she had started with a fellow student went under, and she failed in her legal studies. She went to the Haut-Jura for her summer holiday but became aware that cynicism had 'killed the child I once was'; she now saw her aunts as 'ageing spinsters' and was oblivious that their 'tenderness was as sweet and as young as ever'. She realised she had become 'a complete egoist' and underwent the agony of being unable to escape her shame, admitting that the more she 'suffered' from what she had become, 'the more [she] denied everything in the nature of sweetness, sensibility and love'.

The quest for those ideals was to be a constant spur to Mathilde through her undoubted triumphs and the disappointments which her spirit and energy enabled her to overcome, and ultimately brought her peace. But as a younger woman, the struggle to give and receive love, or even to be accepted and sufficiently praised, was hard for her. She harnessed her powerful imagination to win a national short story competition, but even that achievement and attending the prize-giving banquet in her first evening dress, a 'periwinkle blue crêpe-georgette' creation, disappointed. The accomplishment 'neither delighted nor intoxicated' her as everything that happened 'seemed to ring false' and had only the 'slight excitement of the moment'. She was fantasising about her funeral in her early twenties as an occasion when the mourners could only express devotion to her, and told a friend that she would like to have Mozart's Requiem performed at it, an early and seemingly passing decision that was to have far-reaching consequences.

Further relentless self-questioning about her dislike of the law, her hostility towards her parents, and above all her 'periods of great

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depression', never clinically diagnosed in keeping with the times, would not let her settle. She considered studying at a psychiatric hospital; she tried to engage with emotions creatively and began, but never completed, novels and plays; she took up singing lessons with an acclaimed teacher – Duparc, Ravel, Chausson and Fauré were her favourites – and through these pursuits believed she might 'restore [her] balance'. But then she 'abandoned everything', dropped out of her studies, took a mundane job with an insurance company and rented a tiny room until her parents persuaded her to return home to save expense. She took her teaching certificate and became a supply teacher, but still could not escape 'the accursed blues' which left her 'worn out and drifting'.

When Mathilde was at her lowest, she removed herself from the humdrum by inventing 'fantastic, marvellous adventures' in which she would take the leading role. Often after these deep-seated heroic imaginings, her mood could just as suddenly shift, and she would emerge 'throbbing with life', singing to herself as she walked the Paris boulevards. Reaching for this more vigorous state was often to guide her decisions in the more dangerous world that was to come.

*

Mathilde Belard made her first escape in May 1932 at the age of twenty-four. She was in charge of a class of fifty ten-year-old 'urchins' and struggling to keep control when the neighbouring teacher heard the racket and stepped in to help. Maurice Carré was 'a handsome, well-dressed young man of about thirty' who stood out from his colleagues 'by his physique, ability and courtesy'. He was charming, an athlete who had only been kept out of the elite Saint-Cyr military academy by illness, a lover of Bach, Mozart, Gide, Proust and 'all modern theatre'; he taught her about painting. He told her that his father had been killed in the war and that as a result his 'dominating and vindictive' Corsican mother forbade him his desired career in the army. His air of authority

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calmed Mathilde's turbulent pupils at either end of the day and he was often waiting at the school gate to walk her home, or to attend plays and concerts.

The following October, Maurice invited her to a friend's flat and, 'looking very grave', proposed to her. He asked her to wait so that he could save some money as well as to persuade his mother of the suitability of the match. Mathilde was 'completely unmoved', as a teacher for a husband was not what her romantic imagination had conjured. Maurice acknowledged that she came from a 'superior class', despite the fact that her father's work was intermittent and her mother had recently told her there was no possibility of a dowry. She still considered her former boyfriend Robert her 'dream man', but suspected that even if his suit were still on the table, he was not stable enough to remain steadfast through her depressions; she was also aware enough of her emotions to wonder if the life of a doctor's wife would encourage the possibility of 'jealousy' as he became privy to his patients' secrets. In the end a formal change of her status in one of the few ways possible at the time was more important than anything. Mathilde recognised that the choice of husband was not to her driven by 'deep-seated loyalty', and the toss of a coin settled her decision: she sent a telegram to Maurice asking him to meet her that same evening at La Coupole, where she accepted his hand.

They married in secret. Mathilde endured a wedding night that was both painful and 'false, comic and a complete illusion', before returning home to lie that she had spent the night at a girlfriend's house. She continued to deny the most seismic event in her life to date as the couple maintained their bachelor living arrangements for the remaining two months of the school year, following which Maurice accepted a job as a schools inspector in Algeria. They planned to find happiness 2,500 kilometres from their 'hostile families'. When they came clean, Mathilde's father was, in fact, 'gently accepting' of his daughter's decision, yet still decided to leave it up to his Jura sisters-in-law to inform his wife of the tidings. Jeanne Belard found her son-in-law 'distant, a lamentable man', while Madame Carré, only informed of the marriage after her son's ship

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had sailed, disowned him in a one-line letter: 'You are no longer my son while you are the husband of that woman.'

The Belards saw the couple off to North Africa from the Gare de Lyon. At the age of twenty-five, Mathilde Carré was still searching for emotional fulfilment and escape and had forged the most available secure allegiance, one seemingly without much passion to guide it. But it had the advantage of taking her to a distant country in which she could forge new bonds and, she hoped, leave her depressions behind her. From now, she would be swept into a life that was always 'dictated by no kind of rational planning on her part' with all the consequences, both good and bad, of such an approach.

*

The dusty outpost of the French Empire that was the Algerian town of Aïn Séfra was only a partial success to one constantly seeking stimulus. The beauty of the Saharan landscape contrasted with their 'empty room whose only contents were an old official iron bed, a large cabin trunk and a few suitcases' left by their pensioned-off predecessors who were 'raddled' and as 'yellow as two old ivory carvings'. Mathilde revelled in the mountains, scrubby oases and desertscapes of North Africa, at finding her young charges' names 'straight out of *The Arabian Nights*', at knowing so much more about them and their families than she had of her Parisian pupils, and at having status as a cog in the French colonial machinery. She imbued her class with 'familiarity and love', 'spontaneity and gaiety', stories and singing. But alongside the new sensations of being valued and shaping young lives, she was simultaneously disheartened that she was a 'poor little schoolteacher' who might end up like her predecessors. She knew she was not living up to her dreams, and recreated her earlier image of herself as an 'extraordinary child' and as a 'well-beloved young girl of so much promise'. At other times she believed she was settling 'down to a future which seemed to have no bounds'. She was rarely consistent in her analysis of her powerful emotions, but always able to

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compellingly describe their extremes as she sought a balanced centre.

The greatest contradiction in Mathilde's seesawing responses, the one that tilted all the rest, was that she thought the marriage was 'as perfect as possible', yet was aware of 'the seeds of dissatisfaction, sadness and irritability' after a couple of years. She was 'desperate' to have a baby, and began to experience the lurches of negativity and self-loathing in which she felt that things 'will turn out badly'; she was aware that she 'spoiled everything [she] touched' as she failed to fall pregnant. The Carrés travelled to France and northern Italy in the summer holidays, and in Venice in 1935 Mathilde decided that her 'immense need to love' could only be fulfilled with a child, followed by the dawning, dramatically phrased realisation that she could 'no longer bear this life' without one. When Maurice went to Oran to carry out his annual military service later in the year, she spent time with an Arab friend, Mus, who had four children he spoke of tenderly; she even went as far as to briefly contemplate the 'temptation' of having a child with him, in order 'to form and direct, to nourish its mind', to put things right after her own childhood. The moment represents the potent combination of yearning and control within her that was to emerge repeatedly for both good and bad.

But before she could consider her next steps, the events that had made her 'world restless and unbalanced' – the Spanish Civil War, Hitler's repeated breaches of the Versailles Agreement as he re-armed, the Munich Conference and the betrayal of Czechoslovakia that paved the way for the looming war – came to a head in their last peacetime holiday in 1939. Mathilde had been growing increasingly miserable, and much as she hated herself for it, part of her was 'pleased' by the worsening situation and that 'everything was going to change' in her life once war came. As it was, everything shifted without political intervention: Maurice's brother had been killed in an aeroplane accident in May and Mathilde had written a condolence letter to the mother-in-law she had never met and who had 'shown no sign of life for six years'. She received a reply that 'accepted' her. When the two women met in Paris the following

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month, Madame Carré delivered a callous, devastating double blow: Maurice was probably unable to father children owing to an adolescent attack of mumps and, worse, his father had not been killed in the Great War, but had been an unfaithful man who had 'died in a madhouse', with strong implications of syphilis in the description. Mathilde knew she had enough trouble with her 'own sanity, instability' and 'morbid anxieties', and became terrified that Maurice might go 'mad' in turn.

*

The outbreak of hostilities solved her dilemma. On 18th September, two weeks after France declared war on Germany, the couple were in Oran, which was even busier and noisier than normal as Maurice's division prepared to embark for Syria. The harbour was filled with ships into which 'men, ammunition, mules, vehicles and supplies were hectically loaded', watched by a 'crowd of idlers, onlookers saying farewell to their loved ones, spies and dreamy Arabs'. In his affection for and understanding of the Arab world, Maurice had made the choice to go to defend the French League of Nations Mandate territory against an as yet unforeseen attack rather than fight on the threatened borders of his own country. Mathilde elided the rush of patriotism that overcame millions of her fellow citizens at this second conflict in just over two decades with her restless, hopeless grief about her childlessness and what she had just discovered about the Carré family to decide that her husband was taking the coward's path. When she looked back on this time from the fractured perspective of the maelstrom of the first two and a half years of war, reflecting on the mingling of 'joy, courage, idealism, excitement and anxiety, her stupid yet magnificent pride', she considered that this was the day her 'marriage ended'. In her absolute fashion, she considered her husband 'dead to her' from then on.

The war and Maurice's departure for Syria once again offered Mathilde the opportunity to start her life afresh. She believed a change 'would settle everything' for her as she still puzzled over her

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'clear-cut impression that [she] was never what [she] was intended to be'. She would at last be able to validate her sense of her latent usefulness and, in another expression of the grandiose romanticising that kept her demons at bay, fulfil 'the great and beautiful task' that had been hidden from her in the emotional emptiness of her first thirty-two years.

*

It took Mathilde some time to get back. She had to pack up the Aïn Séfra home of six years which now meant nothing to her and again make her way north to Oran, where most of the shipping had been requisitioned. After a few days she crammed on to a boat for Marseilles, where she caught a train to Paris, by which time she was 'full of fire and wanted to get at the enemy'. She found her father back in his Great War uniform and about to join the Paris Engineers in the Charente; her brother was in a signals regiment. She took one of the few options available for a woman and signed up for an eleven-week nursing course with the Union des Femmes de France, part of the Red Cross.

An early and comprehensive strike by the French and British would have toppled Hitler's regime, but the only military action on the ground was the French invasion of the Saar region which came to a faltering halt as the German lines were reinforced in mid-October. It was a tense time of political as well as military stasis. Public opinion moved uneasily between fighting an all-out war and what might be salvaged of the Third Republic by negotiation. The Phoney War, in Paris as in London, was a period of suspended reality characterised by confused bureaucracy, party-going and the relaxation of moral codes; it was known as the *drôle de guerre* as if the lack of fighting had a comic element even as Denmark and Norway fell. Mathilde found it a 'ridiculous' period of 'incredible light-heartedness', disliked the 'state of euphoria' in Paris, and censoriously observed 'the great political speeches, mulled wines … a few war stories and victory songs referring to the Maginot and Siegfried lines, propaganda, leg-pulling' and 'complete lack of

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morality' as she went about her training. She longed to prove herself in the 'military zone' rather than looking after 'women and babies', and in her eagerness for action dismissed her less committed fellow trainees as 'jealous, petty [and] gossipy'.

*

The *drôle de guerre* came to an abrupt end in the early hours of 10th May 1940 as the Germans attacked on a 175-mile front in brutal violation of their repeated statements that they would respect the neutrality of Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. Dive-bombers softened up any resistance, tank divisions smashed through the lines at their weakest points, and airborne troops landed behind enemy lines or directly on top of the supposedly impregnable fortifications designed for the static warfare of twenty-five years earlier. The Allied commanders had had neither time nor strategic impetus to implement the lessons of blitzkrieg in Poland or Norway and the result was failure on a deadly scale. Winston Churchill's first day as British prime minister dawned with the news of 'events … of an order more terrible than anyone had foreseen'. Mathilde met an officer on a train who spread a rumour about a division on the front line which had been abandoned by their officers, leaving each of them with 'a little bit of money and a bottle of rum'. She was one of only three of her nursing intake of eighty with the skill and determination to qualify and had been at her post as matron at an emergency dressing station at Beauvais for ten days when the Maginot Line was smashed.

On the 14th, the unprecedented German tank advance – complete with combat engineers throwing up pontoon bridges to cross rivers and canals, and with each division accompanied by self-propelling artillery and a brigade of motorised infantry – established a thirty-mile wide bridgehead in the middle of the French lines at Sedan from where they began to push the Allied armies northwards to the Channel. Were it not for the evacuation of 198,000 troops of the British Expeditionary Force and 140,000 French and Belgians from Dunkirk, Britain would have been forced to sue for

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peace. As it was, nearly all their equipment, transport and weaponry was lost.

Mathilde was baffled and appalled as to how the sizeable and well-equipped armies were being routed, but had no time to ponder an answer as her patients arrived in increasing numbers. At first she saw a trickle of civilian refugees, whose domestic burns, piles, blisters and appendicitis frustrated her in her desire to experience battle. A few days later, the courtyard of the dressing station filled with 'dying men writhing in wheelbarrows', the bandaged walking wounded, and those so traumatised that they attacked imagined Germans 'with the proverbial strength of mad people'. The doctors, led by a commandant with a 'Rabelaisian bonhomie', and the two nurses, in their nun-like uniforms, worked around the clock, fortified by sandwiches and whisky. Mathilde's 'morale was high' as she excelled in her first encounter with war.

When the Luftwaffe started to bomb the retreating French, the work gratified much more elemental feelings in her. She and a student doctor went to a wood near Beauvais which was rumoured to contain many wounded. They drove along a road packed with infantry and civilians who hurled themselves into ditches when the strafing started up. They struggled against the flow of this stream and even though when they arrived they found the wood untouched, peaceful and carpeted with late-spring flowers, Mathilde acknowledged the 'strange thrill' in knowing each moment could be her last. At such times, 'the body lives, lives intensively … life is still everything, but it is already immaterial'. She acknowledged that her short sight meant that she saw much less of the terrifying detail of what was going on, yet was still able to take 'an almost sensual pleasure in real danger', '*une volupté extraordinaire*'. The craving for this arousal, alongside her immense courage, a yearning to be useful and loved in great causes, her intelligence and human instinct to survive, were to govern her next two years.

In most periods of history, Mathilde Carré's possibilities would have been unfulfilled, as she was acutely aware, but the lightning defeat of France's Third Republic in the late summer of 1940 was

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the perfect catalyst for circumstance, her human qualities and her psychology to combine into a life of adventure, danger and paradox; a life in which the very characteristics that led to her noble aspirations were simultaneously the flaws that precipitated her three-act tragedy.

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2

A Useful Suicide

By September 1940, Mathilde Carré's world had 'crumbled about [her] ears', and the most valid way out of the 'hopeless mess' of her life so far would be to end it. She was about to cast herself into the River Garonne before a sudden change of heart: she would fling herself into the war instead.

Her disjointed upbringing and restless dissatisfaction had been brought to this crisis by the physical and spiritual agony of 'La Débâcle', the Fall of France, during which she had displayed a determination to serve when many others had given up. Now she, and France herself, was on the run; the country was divided in two and the 'Dark Years' had begun. Courage, compromise and complex allegiances would be needed. A chance meeting in a restaurant in the middle of the month, two days after her decision to live, would bring the curtain up on her next scene.

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With the British Expeditionary Force and a large part of the French army out of the picture, 143 German divisions had launched an assault along a 400-mile front stretching from Abbeville to the Rhine on 6th June. The French mustered only sixty-five divisions and Beauvais was evacuated just ahead of the German bombers. Mathilde left the ruined city at dawn with a doctor who only managed to salvage a candlestick taken from his soldier son's bedside table. Their patients were abandoned to be tended by the enemy, and she took scant comfort that 'the dying on the stretchers did not understand' what was going on as the stunned 'living understood

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just as little'. They used the last of their petrol to get to Rouen, where they subsisted for three days on the milk and bread an elderly nun in a small almshouse could spare until they were able to board a train to Paris.

Mathilde was swept along by the waves of chaos overwhelming her country. She was in Paris only for a day, just enough time to learn that she had been awarded a medal by the Ministry of National Defence for her nursing work, before deployment to another emergency dressing station at Mantes. Within a few days 'the military rout' had caught up with them there too. The French army reminded Mathilde of a 'decapitated frog' twitching on the spit, 'convulsive movements which lasted until the signing of the Armistice'. She was fired by tales of courage, such as of the young Saint-Cyrien who defended a valley path to his last bullet, which he turned on himself rather than surrender. She despised a healthy soldier who came to their dressing station who either had to be a 'fifth columnist' or a deserter, and was later arrested with many of his cohort as he tried to swim a river to safety.

By now 'the Exodus' was fully under way as 2 million of the 5 million inhabitants of Paris and the Seine region fled without any government direction. Overall, 6–8 million citizens were heading for the south at an agonising rate of between three and twelve miles per day through a country with dwindling food stocks and resentful local inhabitants. Of the 23,000 residents of Chartres in May, only 800 remained a month later; ninety per cent of Lille's population of 200,000 were on the move. Mathilde experienced 'physical fear' for the first time when Mantes was bombed, which caused her 'an extraordinary feeling of elation'; she was 'calmed' by the heightened sensation of living on the outer edge of danger with no control over her fate. When another evacuation was ordered, she hitched a lift on an artillery lorry and once again arrived in a panic-stricken Paris, only to be despatched immediately to Orléans in the Loire Valley. She was 'furious and in despair' at the collapse of her country.

Mathilde and a colleague, Jane Smiro, joined the vast creeping throng heading towards the perceived safety of the Loire. Those

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who still had petrol crawled along in endless columns of cars, lorries, even hearses; bicycles and horse-drawn vehicles were brought out of barns and sheds, and wheelbarrows and prams were loaded with the elderly, the very young, and teetering mounds of mattresses and household possessions. A young resident of Angers noted in her diary on 17th June that the refugees were like exhausted 'automatons' walking 'towards a single vague goal: the south'. When the cars ran out of fuel they were abandoned, doors hanging open in the haste to get away from the screaming, strafing Stuka dive-bombers. Human and equine corpses were pushed to the sides of the road to allow the straggle to keep moving; the air soon began to stink in the summer heat. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry described the scene from the air looking as if 'some giant had kicked a massive anthill'; his wife Consuelo was fleeing with 'no transport, no possessions and almost no money' and did not 'know whether to cry or scream, beg or be silent, stay or go – but go where?' Mathilde was outraged at the sight of the 'people running away like cowards, following the example set by the army', and that there was no food to be had on arrival in overcrowded Orleans.

There was talk of a 'great battle' being planned on the Loire, and Mathilde's indignation, exacerbated by the discovery that her nursing unit had already left the city, was mollified when she found that officers from a tank battalion were billeted in the same chateau. Her spirits lifted still further when amongst them she found René Aubertin, a childhood friend from the Jura who was now a tank captain. Aubertin introduced her to 'a curious man with a Slav accent' of Russian extraction named Marc Marchal. Marchal was an 'intelligent and charming' scientist amongst whose distinctions was the presidency of the Association of French Chemists. By this stage any talk of fighting back was mere bravado, but the encounter with Aubertin did at least guarantee Mathilde a place in an army truck the following day. They managed only sixty kilometres and once again they were 'machine-gunned all along the road', at one point the bullets passing just in front of Mathilde's face. By now she no longer thrilled to danger, and felt neither the exhilaration

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nor the 'physical shrivelling' of fear but rather disgust at the pusillanimity of the hapless soldiers she had been 'bending over backwards' to help.

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Verdun, a small city on the Belgian border, had held out against the Germans for ten months in 1916. The bloody and heroic defence cost 162,000 French and 100,000 German lives, and was led by Philippe Pétain, earning him promotion to marshal of France. Pétain had written what he presumed to be a posthumous citation, referring to the 'sentiment of military honour', for Captain Charles de Gaulle whose whole company had been wiped out. A quarter of a century later, de Gaulle was to make much of the notion of honour, to his former commanding officer's detriment. The town that had stood as the symbol of French valour and pride fell on one day in 1940 with the loss of only 200 German lives, and the Anglophobe Pétain became, in his mid-eighties, head of state. He and the equally elderly supreme commander of a mere three weeks, General Weygand, were 'sodden with defeatism' and evacuated the government to Tours for three days on 10th June before retreating further to Bordeaux. The swastika was to be hoisted on the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe on the 14th without a single shot fired by the French in defence of their capital. A solitary colonel who tried to set up a machine-gun post at the Porte d'Orléans was prevented by a police inspector.

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Three days after Paris fell, Mathilde and Jane Smiro had arrived unscathed but exhausted in a village between Tours and Bordeaux, where they knocked on the door of a *hôtel-Dieu*, a hospital run by nuns. Two tank corps officers had just been turned away at the Judas grille despite the fact that one of the men was bleeding profusely from a head wound. The furious nurses went to find bandages for the wounded man, Jean Merciaux, who proposed

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after his treatment that they go to have a drink in a neighbouring café. On their return to the farm where he was billeted, he gave up his room to Mathilde and Jane, sleeping himself in the hay loft with his men. The next day, Jane 'attached herself to some airmen and disappeared' while Mathilde moved with the battalion to their new quarters in a seminary at Cazères-sur-Garonne. Merciaux had been educated at Saint-Cyr and served in the Foreign Legion; the war-seasoned Mathilde felt he 'knew the same world' as her and that 'they were already two old friends'. Three days later, she shared his billet in the bishop's cell, and decided she was in love for the first time. The couple spent their days socialising with Merciaux's brigade, playing bridge and draughts, and the battalion became a 'real family' to her in the unreality of the cessation of hostilities. Even the news that her father and three of her cousins were now prisoners and another cousin dead barely dimmed her new happiness.

For someone who had raged against the conduct of the war, any lingering shame or misery at the French capitulation left Mathilde when she realised in July that she had become pregnant under the enormous crucifix and assorted paintings of the Virgin in the bishop's cell. She 'brimmed over with life and joy'. For the first time she anticipated both giving and receiving unconditional love, and the 'prospect of a child gave … an exceptional purity' to her ardour for Merciaux such as she had not felt for her husband. She felt 'there had never been a war or anything else unpleasant in [her] life'.

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The lovers had met on the same day that the government requested an armistice. The treaty was signed on 22nd June, at Hitler's order in the same railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne as the signing of the treaty that had ended the Great War on such 'degrading' terms for the German people. That day, the British Cabinet in London approved Churchill's idea of an organisation, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), to 'set Europe ablaze'

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through 'sabotage, secret subversive propaganda, the encouragement of civil resistance in occupied areas [and] the stirring up of insurrection' to overcome their current inability to fight conventional warfare on the continent.

On 9th July, the French Parliament voted to abandon the Third Republic. The new state would have as its motto *Travail, Famille, Patrie* as a sterner and less idealistic replacement for the Revolutionary *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*. The Armistice divided France into a northern zone and the coastline under direct German rule, and a southern zone extending from the Spanish border to Nice, and as far north as Bourges and Tours. The latter would be run by Pétain's government, eventually from the spa town of Vichy, suitable because of its spacious hotels to house the various departments. The occupied zone encompassed three-quarters of the country's industrial wealth, its prime farmland and seventy per cent of its population.

The 'Lion of Verdun' himself wished to avoid *Polonisation*, the murders and privations which Poland was suffering under direct military rule, yet was implicitly aligning the government with the Nazi regime. In theory, he governed the occupied zone as well as the unoccupied, but only took the short journey to Paris once. He was trapped between the 'two scorpions' tails' of the Armistice: 1.5 million captured Frenchmen remained in German territory, enslaved hostages to extort obedience to the Reich, and the country was to be bled dry to pay the cost of its occupation. All but 100,000 troops of the French army, the same number that Germany had been allowed to keep inside its borders in 1919, were disbanded and the fleet disarmed, but the huge French Empire was left intact. Pétain stated to his countrymen that 'if I could no longer be your sword, I wanted to be your shield'. A new national anthem, 'Maréchal, nous voilà!', replaced the 'Marseillaise'.

Hitler explained to Mussolini that he wanted 'a French government functioning on French territory' to run its own neutralised country rather than having it 'flee abroad to London to continue the war from there'. He saw it as an 'unpleasant responsibility' to

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have to act in 'the administrative sphere', but realised that if France's armies had moved to North Africa to continue fighting, the Axis military effort would be 'dangerously dispersed … offsetting the advantage of total military occupation of the continent'.

Was Pétain at that point the saviour of the French state, maintaining government with 'honour' as he promised, protecting the huge number of soldiers who now became prisoners rather than combatants – as many as had been killed in the previous war – or little better than a sympathiser awaiting Germany's ultimate victory? The Armistice seemed to keep some sort of hope alive for resistance to the Nazis and at least for the foreseeable future protected French Jews, despite appearing to recreate some sort of mythical pre-Revolutionary France based on traditional Catholic values.

For many French, the Armistice simply meant they had survived and could go about their business. They would be free of the threat of the revolutionary disorder of Communism, a state-subversive movement since the Communist Party had been banned at the point of the Nazi–Soviet Pact a year earlier. To some, the settlement was practical, even sensible: André Gide, arguably the leading author of the time, wrote in his journal (intended for publication) that coming to terms 'with yesterday's enemy is not cowardice but wisdom: as well as accepting what is inevitable'. To others, including the writer Jean Guéhenno, the agreement was so sickening that he could only feel 'pain, anger and shame'; he loathed the way the French radio said the marshal's name 'in the same way we would say "my love"'. Although the treaty was not due to take effect until the 25th, soldiers laid down their arms at once: Rommel, driving his men forwards to Brittany, found those from whom he feared attack standing by the side of the road; the French Colonel Charly was shot by his own men after he ordered them to fight out of an encirclement near the Maginot Line.

Hitler was careful not to overplay his hand. He had got a swift and cheap peace, leaving a semblance of government which spared German manpower to serve elsewhere, and gained an income of

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about 20 million francs per day as payment for the Occupation.* The Reich claimed the fruits of French industry in the north and grain quotas which started at a manageable 550,000 tons but were at 1.2 million tons by 1942 to feed the German troops on the Russian front.

Some, led by General de Gaulle, already in exile with his Free French, favoured fighting on, despite the hopeless situation and the potentially dire repercussions. His first broadcast from London on 19th June announced that 'The flame of French resistance can never go out', but many of his compatriots felt that his was not the right path: of the 1,600 men in London's White City camp following the evacuation from Dunkirk, only 152 chose to sign up with the Free French over repatriation.

For a few, resistance was pointless unless it was within their country's borders. Many believed the invaders would go home following the inevitable collapse of Britain and most just wanted to live in peace with their families: between 50,000 and 90,000 of their countrymen had been killed and twice as many wounded in the last six weeks and the tally of 1.3 million dead and 4 million wounded from the previous war remained etched on to memories.

Life was changed for those that found their homes in the occupied zone. The *tricoleur* flag had been replaced by the swastika; there were few French vehicles on the road; German soldiers were served first in shops, and with the rate of exchange at twenty francs to the Reichsmark, eight francs more than before the victory, they soon cleared the shelves. Jobs were not yet as rare as they were to become, food was reasonably plentiful and bicycles

* Exchange rates during the war are hard to calculate as currency flow ceased, but at the rate SOE offered in 1942 to an agent in London, 20 million francs equates approximately to £115,000 in the currency of the day, or somewhere over £6 million in 2018 values. The Germans reckoned that it had cost the French 30 million francs per day to maintain their army, so this was an affordable tax. This rate of exchange will be used throughout.

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commanded only a small premium. André Gide commented in his diary on 9th July that 'If German dominance meant abundance, nine-tenths of Frenchmen would accept it, three-quarters of them with a smile.' Survival and relative stability were paramount. Sartre pointed out that it was 'necessary to work' so as not to 'perish', and 'necessary for the peasant to grow beets', even if half of them went to Germany; and that the railway engineers' courage 'saved hundreds of lives' as they brought rations into Paris and smuggled resisters around the country, yet they simultaneously aided the occupiers as the locomotives and rolling stock could be seized at any time to serve war aims. For the next four years, 'every one of our actions was ambiguous' and 'a subtle venom poisoned even the noblest undertakings'.

Most nations, including the United States, Canada and Australia, recognised Pétain's government as legitimate, but Vichy cut off diplomatic relations with Britain after Churchill ordered the French ships fired upon at Mers-el-Kébir in Algeria on 3rd July to prevent them from falling into German hands; 1,297 French lives were lost, and bitterness sundered the recent alliance. The midshipman nephew of Mathilde's doctor-companion in the flight from Mantes had been killed in the attack at Mers-el-Kébir, and the uncle blamed 'those traitors at Vichy' for their refusal to surrender the fleet rather than the British for the attack when they encountered each other later in the year. Pétain – who dated back to before the Entente Cordiale of 1904 brought nearly 1,000 years of intermittent conflict between Britain and France to an end – regarded his northern neighbour as a foe, and one who preferred to fight his wars on French soil.

For the politicians, an armistice was preferable to the looming unconditional surrender without hope of negotiation; for the population, it was a relief to be out of the war and at peace again. Hitler shelved his invasion plans for Britain, Operation Sealion, in the autumn of 1940, but had printed plans which threatened a considerably more restrictive life than anything imposed on the occupied zone in France, let alone Vichy with its 'semi-independent regime': all able-bodied British men between the ages of seventeen and

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forty-five were 'to be interned and, as far as possible, removed to the mainland'. Eleven million would effectively be enslaved to work on the continent. The 'welfare of the [remaining] inhabitants' was to be considered 'only in so far as they contribute directly or indirectly towards the maintenance of law and order and the securing of the country's labour force for the requirements of the troops and the German war economy'.

The prosecutor at Pétain's post-war trial entitled his memoirs *Four Years to Erase from Our History*, and attempts to remove the marshal from French consciousness started in 1944. There are now hundreds of streets and squares named after de Gaulle, including the former place de l'Etoile where the Arc de Triomphe stands; the last of those named after Pétain, in a village of forty inhabitants near Verdun, changed its name in 2013. A Resistance hero described the atmosphere in 1940 as 'full of fear and the face-saving feeling that after all France was still a country'. Whatever compromises were to come, however 'xenophobic and repressive' the 'moral and political asphyxiation' later, at the time the Armistice could be seen as the least bad result of catastrophic diplomatic, political and military failures going back seven years or more. Questions about the ends of patriotism, motive and survival become much easier with hindsight, particularly from 1942 on as the symbols of French nationality disappeared and deprivations increased. In the end, the Vichy government, as de Gaulle well understood, was 'potentially more traumatic than the defeat of 1940 and the German occupation, because Vichy was the creation of France itself'. Many of the wounds opened by the Armistice, with all its philosophical, political and patriotic paradoxes, have not fully healed to this day.

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All Mathilde's energy was focused on her love for Jean and their unborn child as they arrived in Toulouse in August. In contrast to the anguish she had felt over the previous weeks, now for her 'defeat had vanished'. Her war would be in many ways emblematic of the choices facing her country. French politicians and civilians alike

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were frequently forced into complex doubleness and temporary betrayal to survive during the Dark Years, but questions around her country's motives and morality did not affect her at that moment. Toulouse's warm Romanesque bricks contrasted with the ornate spa architecture and ironwork in the new seat of government, and its strong left-wing tradition and proximity to the escape route over the Pyrenees into neutral Spain made it a natural meeting point for those determined to continue the struggle. It even had a statue of Joan of Arc in the main square for inspiration. Merciaux was awaiting his transfer to the Foreign Legion and North Africa, and she considered she 'had never been so happy in [her] life'.

A miscarriage in early September changed everything. Mathilde was heartbroken as hope 'fled'. The departed Merciaux was no longer a noble war hero but 'a man like any other', as her great love was shattered by this calamity. The passionate player in her own melodrama decided that life had nothing more to offer as she conflated her personal torment with that of her country: first France, now she had been defeated; she was in despair at her repeated failures and her blank future. She looked at the 'balance sheet' of her life and vowed to drown herself in the turbid waters of the Garonne. But her indefatigable pride reasserted itself. She would serve her country after all and if necessary 'commit a useful suicide'.

Calmed by the reassertion of her spirit and always swift to act on her impulses, Mathilde sought out the British consul to discuss her options. He suggested that rather than resuming her nursing career with the Free French in England, 'in France another field of action lay open to patriots'. The British had lost the land war, the air war was in the balance and the Nazis now had 'access to three seas'; they could only fight on against the most powerful military machine the world had ever seen with 'the invisible weapon, intelligence'. With little idea of how she would get into this undefined sphere of action and no further guidance from the consul, Mathilde decided to stay in the city and see what happened.

Her path became clear the very next day, 17th September. She had put on her only suit, a grey one, to go out to dinner with her 'feather-brained friend' Mimi Muet, who was beautifully turned out in

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