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“A Curiosity of British Military History:”

Representation of the 1941 Levant Crisis and French Nationhood in British News Media

In June of 1940, as the Battle of France drew to a close and the French cabinet scrambled to draw up an armistice with Germany, Winston Churchill made a famously bold proposal: that the nations of France and Great Britain be united into a Franco-British Union which could use the combined forces of the two nations to resist the Germans. Churchill's suggestion was undoubtedly political in nature; he was deeply concerned about the strategic consequences of a French surrender, particularly losing control of the French navy, and was willing to resort to desperate measures to avoid this outcome. These concerns were shared by General Charles de Gaulle, who opposed the armistice and would go on to lead the Free French Forces in the coming years. Churchill also feared the consequences of an armistice on public opinion in Britain. In the essay "Churchill and de Gaulle," historian Francois Kersaudy writes that "France had been the last continental bastion in World War I; once it crumbled, might not the British, too succumb to defeatism? By presenting to them a Frenchman with stature, willpower, a name, a reputation, a policy and a voice, he was promoting a fiction; that France had not fallen, since it was continuing

the struggle in the person of General de Gaulle."¹ From the very first trouble in France, then, those with the greatest stakes in British public opinion were aware of the importance of maintaining a palatable presentation of Frenchness and the British relationship to it, if the British were to remain in some way allied with the French. This was particularly difficult given that from the same early point, many French leaders were deeply suspicious of the British motive for involvement in their crisis. Though in 1940 Churchill and de Gaulle reportedly had an untroubled relationship, several members of the French cabinet denounced the proposal of the Franco-British Union on the grounds that Churchill must be attempting to seize French colonial holdings.² This tension, and the importance of its representation to the British public, would be a constant throughout the years of the war, and the stakes would certainly get no lower.

By the next year, Churchill's relationship with de Gaulle had become strained due to Churchill's obligation to comply with the highly suspicious policy that the Americans were taking toward the Free French.³ Control of France's colonial holdings was the site of great tension and some military confrontation between the Vichy and Free French leaderships, and the issue was further aggravated by pressure from Germany and Britain, respectively. In the summer of 1941, British and Free French forces moved together into the Vichy-controlled Levant region in the Middle East, primarily Syria and Lebanon, and were victorious within a month. This conflict was the only time in the war when British and French military forces fought against one another directly.

¹ Francois Kersaudy, "Churchill and de Gaulle," in *Cross Channel Currents: 100 Years of the Entente Cordiale*, ed. Richard Mayne, Douglas Johnson, and Robert Tombs. (London: Routledge, 2004.) 119.

² Avi Shlaim, "Prelude to Downfall: The British Offer of Union to France, June 1940." *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 3 (1974): 27-63.

³ Kersaudy, 120.

If it was difficult for Churchill to manage British perception of French national politics in 1940, it is easy to see how much more complex it would be to present a direct military involvement in a way that was not troubling to the British public. Much of this problem fell into the hands of the journalists covering the Levant crisis. Many were correspondents, posted in a specific region for a long period of time to send back reports regularly for the paper that employed them. Journalists, and particularly correspondents, were subject to Ministry of Information restrictions on information passage and pressure from the military to portray the conflict in a positive light in order to keep public support high. In extreme cases, journalists were strongly pressured and even formally incorporated into supporting the war effort, strongly restricting their range of potential topics and angles. Although it is impossible to know which journalists were subject to which pressures, particularly since correspondents typically published anonymously, it is certain that they were obliged either explicitly or implicitly to write from angles that were not perceived as overly disruptive to their audience.

In order to study how news media presented the crisis to a British audience, I will examine British newspaper articles describing events in the Levant from May to August of 1941. My focus is on Anglo-French relations during this period, and specifically the question of how news media in the twentieth century handled international politics when the units of nation and state are complicated. In this case, the difficulty lies in managing the distinction between Free and Vichy France in relation to the concept of Frenchness. The relationship between the nation and colonialism will become relevant as well; many of the events in the Levant occur because of its situation as a colony and because of colonial soldiers, and so I will look comparatively at how different accounts invoke Frenchness as it relates to issues of empire. *The Times of London* had

an unnamed correspondent near the fighting in Syria, and this reporter's columns are the primary source of direct observations and experiences of the fighting. They are also a rich source of descriptions of racial and national difference, and the two are frequently conflated in the case of Lebanese and Syrian civilians as well as Senegalese soldiers fighting for the Vichy French.⁴ More narratively-inclined pieces from both *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* engage more directly with the national difficulties of the situation. Many articles particularly struggle to resolve Vichy French soldiers fighting against the British, which is obviously presented in a negative light, without damaging the positive representation of the French people as a whole. Typically this is accomplished by blaming the Germans for misleading the French soldiers, but even within this category there is variation; some claim that German propaganda is the cause, others focus on the use of force and manipulation, and still others emphasize that the Vichy French forces are comprised of good soldiers who do their duty and follow orders at their own risk and therefore only their commanders can be at fault.⁵ Concepts of the "French spirit" and "French valor" - essentially, a reduced form of Frenchness itself in the eyes of the authors - are in theory complicated by the Fall of France, but in practice are more commonly used to resolve

⁴ "Advance In Syria," *The Times*, July 7, 1941.

An Australian Correspondent with the A.I.F, "British Prisoners In Syria," *The Times*, July 21, 1941.

Our Special Correspondent, "End Of Vichy In Syria," *The Times*, July 18, 1941.

⁵ In order of reference:

"Vichy And Syria," *The Times*, June 4, 1941.

"French Dupes In Syria," *The Times*, July 11, 1941.

"Damascus Now Free French: Gains Elsewhere Merj Ayoum Still Resisting," *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23, 1941.

"Beating The Germans,," *The Times*, July 16, 1941.

"Cease Fire in Syria," *The Times*, July 14, 1941.

the ambiguity by sweeping over it. Ultimately I am investigating narratives of nation and national conflict and how the ways that the complexities of those narratives are treated reveal the concerns of their audience. Rather than attempting to hide the ambiguities of the situation from an innocent public, the papers instead worked on the assumption of a great amount of public awareness of the issues at stake in the war. They then attempted to utilize those issues, including the fundamental opposition to Germany and the complications of racial and colonial politics that the war produced, to minimize the cognitive dissonance required to describe and understand Britain's relationship to a divided France.

The Second World War and British Journalism

In May of 1940 Nazi Germany initiated an invasion of France. The Battle of France lasted from the 10th of May to the 22nd of June in 1940, progressing rapidly due to great German military superiority, and by the 14th of June German armed forces had arrived in Paris, forcing the French government to flee south to the spa town of Vichy. The leaders of the retreating French government faced a dilemma about whether to accept the armistice that Germany offered, exacerbated with the fact that they were bound by treaty to Britain not to ally with Germany. To the great distress of Winston Churchill, who had supplemented the short-lived military resistance in France and in desperation to avoid French surrender had proposed the Franco-British Union, only a week later France signed an armistice with the Germans which allowed German occupation of parts of France and allowed Germany a great deal of oversight into the actions of the French military.

The armistice the government eventually felt forced to sign established a German occupation zone in the north and west, and left the remainder to French rule. A provisional government was created in Vichy, led by Philippe Pétain, which nominally controlled the whole of France but was heavily subject to German influence through 1941, though the situation changed later on in the war. General Charles de Gaulle, who had opposed the armistice, led a 'Free French' government in exile to encourage French citizens to resist Germany and to control parts of the French military, which became the Free French Forces, to fight alongside the Allies. The core of the Free French forces consisted of only three thousand Frenchmen who had evacuated to Britain in the aftermath of the Battle of Dunkirk. Immediately after the occupation of Paris, de Gaulle began courting and liberating French colonies in order to supplement his own soldiers, primarily targeting colonies in North Africa

Syria and Lebanon had been controlled by France prior to the war as a result of a League of Nations mandate a decade earlier, and in 1941 were still controlled by Vichy France. In the Paris Protocols of May 1941, Vichy France granted German military aircraft the right to land in the region and also signed over access to French military facilities there. While the Protocols were never ratified, the agreement with regard to the Levant stood, and within a few days the British were aware of its contents.⁶ The British, worried that German presence in the Levant could compromise the security of Allied-controlled Egypt, initiated a military offensive in the region alongside Free French forces in order to bring it under Free French control. While the offensive was ultimately successful, it resulted in a period of tension between British and Free

⁶ Aviel Roshwald, *Estranged Bedfellows : Britain and France in the Middle East during the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 64.

French leadership regarding practical control of the Levant leadership, the degree of international might Free France ought to wield, and conflicting British and French imperial aspirations.

The campaign began on the 8th of June 1941, and the armistice ending hostilities and Vichy French control over the region was signed on the 14th of July. The Allied strategy was to target the major cities of Syria and Lebanon by invading from neighboring countries under British control, most notably Iraq and Palestine. This strategy was immediately successful, resulting in Allied victories in Damascus on the 21st of June and in Beirut in Lebanon on the 12th of July. There was also an air component to the conflict, but the initial Vichy French air strength faded quickly as the Royal Air Force targeted Vichy planes while they were on the ground, resulting in great losses. Germany did not directly supplement the Vichy effort at all, only offering strategic support in the form of rights to fly through Axis airspace. Colonial soldiers were used on all sides; one Vichy colonial regiment included a number of Senegalese soldiers, who are discussed extensively in the British news coverage of the period. The Allied soldiers attacking from the south included one French Foreign Legion as part of the Free French Forces and divisions from British India and Australia, while those to the north were British, Indian, and Jordanian.⁷ A huge number of prisoners of war were taken on both sides, though most were returned once the armistice was signed. Vichy commander General Henri Dentz requested an armistice on the 11th once it became clear that Beirut was about to fall.⁸

Negotiations were brief and straightforward, with the single complication that on the orders of

⁷ A B Gaunson, *Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon & Syria, 1940-45* (Houndmills: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987), 44.

⁸ Meir Zamir, "De Gaulle and the Question of Syria and Lebanon during the Second World War: Part I," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 43, no. 5 (2007): 685.

the French government Dentz refused to meet with Free French leaders, only the British.⁹ Three days later, on Bastille Day, General Dentz signed the states of Syria and Lebanon over to the British and Free French and began the process of withdrawing Vichy soldiers from the region.

One of the reasons that the news media discussing this crisis in the Levant is so interesting is the dearth of attention it has received; the existing literature on the crisis refers sparingly, if at all, to the body of journalistic sources. What does exist on the conflict focuses primarily on autobiography and the roles of individuals such as Churchill, de Gaulle, and the generals who fought there. A. B. Gaunson's *The Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon and Syria, 1940-1945* engages with the lack of methodological diversity in the field.¹⁰ He claims that the majority of existing studies of the period "are personal memoirs, flawed by failures of memory and distortions of a more calculated kind. These have merely deepened the mystery and raised the question in a more acute form."¹¹ In order to escape the problems of uncritical use of autobiographical material, Gaunson focuses primarily on public communication from during the events, including telegraphs, correspondence, and personal papers, but like most of his colleagues he does not investigate how the crisis was presented to the public or what the stakes of its perception were. This narrowness means that my focus on how British news media processed and interpreted the events in the Levant is a significant "missing puzzle piece" in a comprehensive understanding of the conflict.

It is necessary to understand the nature of British journalism in the Second World War in order to acknowledge the larger cultural dialogue, the significance of nationalistic narrative in

⁹General Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck, "Operations in the Middle East, 5 July 1941-31 October 1941," Supplement to the London Gazette, August 21 1946, 4216.

¹⁰Gaunson, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

journalism, and the oversimplification of complex dynamics that can occur in the context of war. Approaching the period from news sources will allow me to at least partially avoid concerns about self-interestedly and retroactively constructed narratives, as well as looking beyond the opinions of a few high-profile individuals whose significance has already been scrutinized intensely. However, while I am interested in the public opinion and dialogue surrounding the Levant crisis, I know that it would be a great mistake to approach news sources as an unproblematic window into this conversation rather than as a creator and moderator of a specific part of it. While the role of news media in such a complex social and political climate is correspondingly complex, it is also a source of analytical richness. In order to contextualize and understand the news sources I use, it is necessary to investigate the practice of British war journalism at this time.

Carlos Barrera's article "Transatlantic Views on Journalistic Education Before and After World War II" explores the process of educating journalists in the mid-20th century. He notes that the education of British journalists in the pre-war period was done almost exclusively through informal apprenticeships: in order to be trained, an aspiring journalist would have to first find a job at a newspaper. This system was one that was deeply ingrained in the culture of British journalism, and there was a great deal of pride around it. The belief was that an editor handling real pieces of work would be a better judge of the quality of that work than any kind of job application procedure, and that having work critiqued in a real workplace would be a better form of education than a school. There was only a single journalism school in Britain up to and including the war period, and Barrera argues that by that time many young journalists were

envious of the superior training of their American counterparts.¹² At an institutional level, though, reluctance to adopt the American model prevailed into the 1960s, and during the war, even the single training program at King's College closed.¹³ This meant that there was no standard in training of British journalists, and most learned by following the models of their colleagues at each particular paper.

War correspondents faced singular pressures to submit pieces that followed a specific narrative, due to caution from the British government that had historical roots. The practice of war correspondence originated in British coverage of the Crimean war, and correspondents were immediately faced with a conflict of interest that has plagued them ever since, namely, that increased access to information and legitimate understanding of the situation facing soldiers abroad is a great opportunity journalistically speaking, but reporting that information carries the risk of decreasing public support and hurting the war effort through unflattering descriptions. Phillip Knightley, a correspondent himself and an expert on war journalism, describes military concern for the consequences of correspondents' presence on the front lines:

The military's methods became more sophisticated as it realized the war correspondents were here to stay and that it would have to coexist with them. Over the years it has tried censorship, appeals to the correspondents' patriotic instincts and, perhaps most successfully of all, recruiting the war correspondents into the overall war effort.¹⁴

There clearly is a great deal at stake in journalists' presentations of highly charged conflicts, and a corresponding amount of concern from their companions and supervisors about the

¹² Carlos Barrera. "Transatlantic Views on Journalistic Education Before and After World War II," *Journalism Studies*, Vol.13(4) (2012): 538.

¹³Ibid., 542.

¹⁴ Phillip Knightley, Foreword in *War, Journalism, and History: War Correspondents in the Two World Wars*, ed. Yvonne T. McEwen and Fiona A. Fiskens., (Oxford: Lang, Peter, AG, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2012.) XII.

repercussions of those presentations. The introduction of war correspondence in the Crimea, and the ensuing backlash against that conflict by a British public who were exposed through news media to the mismanagement of the Crimean War, undoubtedly set a precedent for military and governmental scrutiny toward those journalists that persisted into the Second World War.

There can be no doubt that the press during the Second World War was strongly influenced by politics, but it would be a mistake to assume that there was no public awareness of this fact. Programs instituted by Churchill through the Ministry of Information to raise awareness of the importance of secrecy and the danger of rumors led to some cynicism about the public's access to truth about the war, While the public wanted more information they generally tended to believe that the press was being distorted by government programs. The British press, naturally, resented the Ministry's programs both for their attempt to reconcile the public with the idea of being uninformed and for the lack of access to information for themselves.

The bulk of the sources I will consult are articles written by war consultants for *The Times* of London. Phillip Knightley's *The First Casualty* is a valuable resource for understanding the role of war correspondents as well as providing some insight into the *Times* and its role in British public awareness during the war. He makes a few separate points that are useful for contextualizing the *Times* sources. First, one of the major sources used by both correspondents and journalists at home were official communiques, which were censored extensively by both foreign military leadership and the Ministry of Information in order to ensure that no information that could be useful to the enemy was available.¹⁵ More specifically, the numbers of losses inflicted by British forces were frequently and intentionally exaggerated in

¹⁵ Phillip Knightley. *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (London: Prion, 2000), 242.

official communiques in order to keep morale up and correspondents, having no other options, reported these numbers as fact.¹⁶¹⁷ Many journalists were outraged at the lack of available and accurate information. Enough of this outrage was centered at *The Times* that in 1939 the War Office's director of public relations took the unconventional step of writing to *The Times* to reassure them that once this phase of the war had passed, there would be more information.¹⁸ However, this did not occur, and as the years passed a great deal of news was generated simply by re-reporting and slightly distorting what had been published elsewhere.¹⁹ There are also noted cases of newspaper administrators, including at the Times, enthusiastically accepting and printing what they seem to have known were falsehoods because they were acceptable.²⁰ Clearly, there was a great deal of pressure on reporters, and lack of accessible or publishable information was a greater issue than it would immediately seem. Though papers were rarely censored, they effectively were through restriction of information, and several articles I use reference this issue.

International Politics and the Role of Germany

A standard feature of British discussion, journalistic or otherwise, about the Levant crisis is the impulse to use German pressure to explain the actions of Vichy soldiers. An article from June 5 1941, while military action in Syria was being considered by Britain but before any action had been taken, makes an immediate claim about the nature of the conflict with the subtitle

¹⁶ Ibid., 262.

¹⁷ Ibid., 268.

¹⁸ Ibid., 242.

¹⁹ Ibid., 273.

²⁰ Ibid., 298.

"Vichy Arms to Serve German Aims." Early on, it assigns all initiative to the Germans, as though the "Vichy Arms" are only a tool of Germany's and can play no active role. A diplomatic correspondent reports that the Germans have a "plan to use the Vichy French as a wall between themselves and the British," i.e. that the Vichy occupiers of Syria are little more than a strategically placed obstacle to German machination. This section of the article features a subheader that reads "French Goaded to Fight British," but nowhere does the author address this claim directly; it is only claimed that Germany is hopeful for a confrontation between the British and Vichy French and why this would be advantageous for them is not addressed. It also reports that "Vichy let it be known that the Government were prepared to defend parts of the French Empire, "alone if need be." Similar declarations have been made before, but they gain in significance as the crisis grows and as German power over Vichy increases." This, in combination with the earlier discussion of German strategic use of Vichy soldiers, create an image of the Germans as manipulative of Vichy France, happy to use their interests for strategic ends but unwilling to devote any resources to defending those interests. It also presents a complex image of Vichy French agency; while early on they are almost objectified to emphasize the "scheming" of the Germans to force Vichy and Britain into opposition, later they are displayed as a victim attempting to defend themselves from that manipulation. It is also noteworthy that the article refers throughout to "Vichy France" when it is discussing their military relationship to Germany, but when the subject is Britain instead they are almost universally just "the French."²¹

²¹"The Threat from Syria," *The Times*, June 5 1941.

This is not the only place that we see deference to Germany as an explanation for the actions of Vichy soldiers. An article from July 14th entitled "Cease Fire in Syria" is a preliminary report on the ceasefire in Syria, which reports that an agreement has been reached, and that British leadership offered the Vichy French favorable terms but were rejected in deference to the preferences of the Germans. It emphasizes the idea that Vichy French soldiers were only fighting out of "blind obedience" and that they "...on orders from Vichy, felt compelled to fight for HITLER against their former Allies and their own countrymen..." It also expresses a hope that after the ceasefire they will be able to "follow their own inclinations" and enlist for Free France instead. It engages directly with the difficulties in handling two different French groups from a British perspective, and resolves the difficulty by assuming everyone associated with Vichy France is under duress by the Nazis. By framing the problem as a lack of agency on the part of Vichy French soldiers, the article indicates that there is no inherent distinction between the various Frenchmen in the conflict, but continues to enforce a political division by the indication that they are "former Allies," which obviously is true in the literal sense but seems contrary to a rhetorical declaration of unity.²²

A correspondent reporting from Ankara (and thus fairly removed from the conflict) on June 16 for the *Times* wrote a piece called "Divided Allegiance in Syria: Vichy troops march beside British," which references many of the same concepts. The correspondent emphasizes that there is only a "small amount of direct information" that is being sent from Syria, and notes that fighting between any British and French forces is only used "when gentle persuasion fails."

²² "Cease Fire in Syria," *The Times*, July 14 1941.

They attempt to break down the proportions of Vichy troops who hold each of a number of views:

[...] 10 per cent, who are decidedly Anglophobes, and who comprise mostly naval officers and also officers of the 17th Senegalese regiment, now fighting on the coast south of Beirut; 20 per cent, who are favourably inclined towards de Gaulle, and who are mostly airmen; the remaining 70 per cent are equally divided between those who obey orders without discussion and those who hold wavering opinions.²³

The strong impulse by this author to find an explanation for the actions of the Vichy French is itself telling, as is the diversity of anti-British sentiment they supply. While obviously there is no way to tell the accuracy of their breakdown, unlike many other articles that seem to only be able to accept the actions of Vichy French soldiers by describing the repression of their universal pro-British feeling, this does not seem entirely unrealistic. He goes on to remark that British and Vichy French troops were known to fraternize during journeys, characterizing the phenomenon as “a curious incident.” The article does indicate a strong impulse to explain the actions of Vichy soldiers, particularly in this case by claiming that some of the soldiers who are anti-British are only obeying orders. It also blames some anti-Britishness on Senegalese soldiers fighting with the Vichy French, which I’ll discuss at more length later.

That piece makes no claim about the moral consequences of following orders regardless of whether those orders align with British or German interests, but in some places it is argued that it demonstrates positive traits in the soldiers. A transcript of a speech given by General de Gaulle in Cairo found in the *Manchester Guardian* piece on June 23, directly after the fall of Damascus, features the origin of a sentiment that is echoed in many other formats:

As a man I think this painful battle is one of Hitler's most horrible successes.

²³ “Divided Allegiance in Syria: Vichy troops march beside British,” *The Times of London*, June 17, 1941.

He has succeeded, thanks to the treachery of dishonorable leaders, in using against France and her allies the valour of the French soldier. Speaking as a Frenchmen... the battles in Syria, lamentable as they are, provide another proof of the courage of my countrymen, whatever cause they serve. I am sure that some day all these men will fight together to rid France of the invader.²⁴

There are many situations where Vichy and Free French soldiers are described as unified because of their mutual French identity, but de Gaulle goes one step further and argues that their unity is derived specifically from their mutual valour. In this formulation, the actions of the Vichy soldiers are completely unproblematic because they are simply a misdirected expression of a good trait, and so the only fault lies with the "dishonorable" leaders who misdirected them.²⁵ Not only are they absolved of responsibility for fighting against the British, it actually demonstrates their courage and reinforces their Frenchness in this construction.

An August 11th article entitled "Vichy and Syria" depicts Vichy French leaders including Petain as hypocritical for being indignant about the British detaining Dentz while " [ignoring] their own treacherous connivance with Axis infiltration, including the use of Syrian air bases to attack the British forces in Iraq. It was this that compelled Great Britain to take action, very reluctantly, to protect herself against a serious danger." It goes on to describe Petain's logic as willful distortion of facts in order to maintain their cooperation with Germany. The article continues to emphasize the importance, and the perceived moral fault, of these lies, clearly assigning the fault to the highest levels of the Vichy government. Of course, as I have made clear, it is almost facetious to imply that British leaders spread no falsehoods and suppressed no

²⁴ "DAMASCUS NOW FREE FRENCH: Gains Elsewhere MERJ AYOUM STILL RESISTING," *The Manchester Guardian*, June 23 1941.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

truths, but ultimately, the cause of fault in this construction is being willing to put in effort toward cooperation with Germany.²⁶

This article also notes that the concept of honor plays a great role in Vichy rhetoric, and that that concept is "prostituted [...] shamefully." This is a strong rhetorical stance from multiple perspectives, and one that is very sharp within the rhetorical context of war. We have previously seen the issue of honor as a credit to Vichy French soldiers and a way to explain their loyalty to their cause without having to come to terms with a British audience's opposition to that cause. In this case, though, it seems that honor is cheapened by its use. This conceptualization not only validates the actions of Vichy soldiers, it demonizes Germany for manipulating the strength of those soldiers and using them against what it assumes to be their own ends.

National Understandings of the Morality of Colonialism

A correspondent piece called "Free French and Syria: Reported Cancellation of Mandate" takes an angle that is surprisingly rare: it focuses on the role of Syrian civilians in the conflict. It describes large scale public support of British forces in Syria upon the announcement of the ceasefire, claiming that "It is reported from Beirut that there have been large-scale demonstrations by crowds, demanding a peaceful surrender. The police are stated to have fired on the demonstrators, and, it is thought, killed several. Leaflets appeared appealing for inhabitants to display white flags on shops and houses whenever British aeroplanes appear." This is an interesting divergence from the trend we have seen so far of using Vichy French support to

²⁶ "Vichy and Syria," *The Times*, August 11 1941.

justify actions; native Syrians are frequently neglected in the conversation. Even more interestingly, the piece seems to use what we would recognize now as an established trope of brutal colonial occupation as a mechanism to demonize the French leadership and assign a freeing role to the British soldiers in the area.²⁷

Another correspondent piece from the *Times* just after the ceasefire corroborates this account, claiming that though "... a large part of the population was still in the mountains, having fled from the approach of the battle, substantial crowds again lined the streets and gave the British and Free French generals a friendly welcome." As in many descriptions of Syrians and Lebanese, such as that in "Free French and Syria: Reported Cancellation of Mandate," their function in the narrative seems to be to reinforce the legitimacy of Free French and British control of the region by emphasizing their support of the change, and it speaks to a level of awareness that colonial control can be troubling that their support is an important part of the narrative. It goes on to describe the relationship between the Lebanese government and the British and Free French generals (in this case Wilson and Catroux) in similar terms. It is noted that the Lebanese Cabinet under Vichy control had little actual power, though it does not mention whether or not this was true prior to the fall of France. It also emphasizes the friendly relationships between the leaders, describing the discussion as "informal and friendly" and noting that General Catroux had "many old friends" in the Cabinet, while Wilson was "cordial" in greeting the dignitaries. The amiable relationships and lack of tension between the leaders are emphasized strongly, which seems to simultaneously legitimize the Lebanese leadership,

²⁷ Our Correspondent, "Free French and Syria," *The Times*, July 1 1941.

reflecting badly on the tight hold Vichy had on the country previously, and erase any potential moral concerns about Free France's role going forward.²⁸

On the 16th of July, two days after the armistice ending the conflict in the Levant was signed, the *Times* published a statement made by Prime Minister Churchill to the House of Commons under the title "Beating the Germans," which clearly follows what we can now recognize as an established trend of framing the conflict in opposition to Germany despite the fact that there was not a single German soldier participating. In the speech, Churchill echoes several other trends that we have seen in some of the previous pieces, notably describing the conflict as a "period of fratricidal strife between Frenchmen and Frenchmen and also between Frenchmen and British, Australian, and Indian soldiers all of whom drew the sword of their own free will in defence of the soil of France." As in the majority of British descriptions of the conflict, regardless of the source, the commonality between the Vichy and Free French soldiers is emphasized and the bond of their shared national identity is emphasized over the political and military division between them. Interestingly, though, Churchill also extends this commonality to not only the British and Australians, but also to the Indians who served as British colonial soldiers. He chooses, then, not to emphasize the colonial relationship and present all parties as equally similar to one another. He also takes an interesting stance toward the role of native Syrians and Lebanese in the conflict; presumably aware that strong independence movements were taking place in both nations at the time, he remarks that "we have been able to bring to the people of Syria and the Lebanon the restoration of their full sovereign independence. We have liberated the country... from the dangerous German intrigues and infiltration which were in

²⁸ Our Special Correspondent, "End of Vichy in Syria," *The Times*, 18 July 1941.

progress." He is undoubtedly taking a great liberty by describing Free French control "independence," but as we will see it is not at all uncommon to see any subjugation by non-Germans ignored to the end of demonizing Germany regardless of whether the issue at hand is colonial soldiers or control of the Levant.²⁹

A *Times* piece I discussed earlier from before the conflict entitled "The Threat from Syria" also engages with the role of Syrians in the conflict. The article reads, "Most of the Syrians themselves appear to be confused in mind, ready to accept money or work from the side that makes them the offer, uneasily aware that German domination would end their hopes of independence, but for the most part irresolute - or at any rate disorganized ... Syria in fact is waiting and wondering, while food becomes scarcer." It is not surprising that in a description of a battle between two major colonial powers that is taking place in one of their colonies, that colony and its people might be depicted as a neutral theater or as a bargaining chip. However, the description goes beyond that, and grants them autonomy but only to the extent of having the capacity to be bought by one of the larger powers involved. Their primary aim seems to be to gain independence, and while Germany seems to be blameworthy for potentially hindering their chance at it, nowhere does it address the moral consequences on France of depriving them of it in the first place. This conceptualization of colonization is a great contrast to the passage we addressed in the last paragraph, in which Vichy's willingness to defend their colonies with or without German assistance is framed as a justified resistance of an oppressed people. The article operates on an assumption of public awareness that the politics of empire do have a moral aspect, but those morals are defined in opposition to Germany even when it requires contradiction.³⁰

²⁹ "Beating the Germans," *The Times*, June 16 1941.

³⁰ "The Threat from Syria."

As I have explained, as well as physically taking place in a French colony the Levant conflict involved a large number of colonial soldiers fighting alongside the British and French, most notably Indians with the British and Senegalese with the Vichy French. As such, many conflicts, and thus many articles, do not involve either the British or French at all and those articles largely do not explicitly explain which colonial forces are associated with which nation.³¹ For this to be a functional strategy, it follows that authors of the *Times* assume a level of public awareness about each colonial relationship and the alliance of each nation, as well as the ability to combine those two in order to be able to understand articles that, for instance, explain that Australian infantry are moving into position to attack Damour and place them in the context of the larger war effort. This awareness continues to function in the aftermath of changes in nationality, as news sources demonstrate amply, but they do also show that terms of nationality are used to essentialize military conflicts and as the primary form of identification in those conflicts, meaning that the stakes in those identifications are very high.

The struggle to manage the complexity of identity in such a conflict can also be seen in the words of political leaders. An article from the *Manchester Guardian* entitled “The Free French Anniversary” describes a gathering of people at Cambridge Theatre in London on June 19 in order to receive a message from General De Gaulle from the Middle East, which includes this excerpt:

A shudder of horror ran the world at the news that the men of Vichy were making the Empire soldiers fight against us and our allies in conjunction with German squadrons for the purpose of maintaining a bridgehead in the Levant for the first forces... It is typical of [Hitler's] devilish genius to make use in this war of his of the degradation of others. We need hardly say that nothing could do more to strengthen the Free French in their determination to wrest their country from his grip and fight with all their might by the side of those who have sworn to break

³¹ “Advance in Syria,” *The Times*, July 6 1941.

him.

At this point, the invocation of Hitler to explain the situation and to assign blame for the contrary actions of Free French soldiers and leaders is not surprising. De Gaulle interestingly does not comment on the Frenchmen who are fighting for Vichy, only expressing sympathy for the Empire soldiers who he describes as being forced to fight for Germany, an action which he describes as “degrading.” By doing this, De Gaulle raises the question of the conjunction of empire and nation in a war context and offers a very simple resolution by expressing solidarity with the Empire forces and forcing no distinction between himself and soldiers who were recruited from his country's colonies.³²

Though it could be a rhetorically productive to de-emphasize the distinction between colonial soldiers and those of their colonizers, there are cases where this strategy works much differently. Several articles in the *Times* were written by Australian correspondents working with the A.I.F. (Australian Imperial Force). A piece called "British Prisoners in Syria" describes the correspondents' conversations with English and Australian soldiers who had been kept in a Vichy prison camp that apparently contained hundreds of Allied (English, Australian, and Indian) soldiers who were released as part of the terms of the armistice that was negotiated through early July and signed on the 14th.³³ The correspondent's focus is on the conditions within those camps. It is unsurprising that prisoner of war camps would be described as unsavoury, but it is hard to tell if the author is attempting to be light-hearted or if they think it is a serious problem that the returning soldiers “...looked like a band of pirates. Every man had grown a

³² “The Free French Anniversary,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 19 1941.

³³ A B Gaunson. *Anglo-French Clash in Lebanon & Syria, 1940-45* (Houndmills: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987), 57.

beard in captivity, because men had lost their razors when they were captured.” The author states that the prisoners draw a distinction between the French and Senegalese soldiers they encountered while in the camps:

I found each man's most vivid impressions of his experiences after capture were identical - the unfailing mildness of the white French troops and the insensate brutality of the Senegalese to their prisoners... one man said to me ... “The Senegalese seemed to be in a frenzy of excitement. They had been drinking, and were like savages rather than normal men.” ... The men told me that there were no white officers present when the Senegalese knocked them about.

This author adds a clear racial slant to the already complex dynamic between the colonial and national divisions. In this case, it is not productive to hazard a guess at whether the Senegalese soldiers were genuinely more brutal than the Vichy French or whether the author or prisoners are exaggerating or fabricating their reports of the situation. Either way, it is a distinct rhetorical move to set the French up in direct opposition to the "insensate" and "savage" Senegalese, emphasizing their humanity as well as their Western-ness and whiteness. If the Senegalese are presented as barely human, as opposed to "normal men," it emphasizes the extent to which the French soldiers are in fact "normal men" in a way that is recognizable to a British audience. In this case, then, racial difference is used to communicate similarity and eliminate the need to examine the Frenchmen and their identities and loyalties further. It's also interesting to note that the soldiers the correspondent talks to are described as either "English" or "Australian," but the title refers to "British Prisoners;" it is possible that to further simplify the situation, the author is subsuming Australians into the larger "British" label. Regardless, it seems as though the author is

trying to emphasize the difference between Vichy French and Senegalese soldiers while minimizing the significance of the presence of Australians.³⁴

The British took Vichy French prisoners as well. In a July 10th *Times* article from a Special Correspondent called “French Dupes in Syria,” the author makes reference to statements from prisoners taken by the British (but does not supply the statements, or make any reference to their whereabouts.) Reportedly, it is “evident from the prisoners’ statements that the Vichy French, for their part, dislike having to obey orders to fight the British, and are doing so under the mistaken impression that Germany had not used in the past and would not at any time have been permitted to use Syria as a base of operations against the British.” The mechanism here is quite simple: the correspondent is arguing that the Vichy French are only cooperating with their orders because they believed lies told by German leadership. It also notes that “the Australian command is well pleased with its men, and almost as complimentary to its enemy,” elaborating that the Australians were fighting Vichy French colonial troops (Zouaves and Senegalese, particularly) who the Vichy Command had placed in a bad position and then failed to reinforce. It is interesting that British sympathy for individuals perceived to be victimized by enemy leadership extends past the boundaries of Frenchness in this case, minimizing the complication of colonial relationships in order to make its argument about the French.³⁵

The piece closes with a strong repudiation of a Vichy response to a situation in Asia where the author argues that they treat Japanese and then British aggression in Indo-China in

³⁴ An Australian Correspondent with the A.I.F, “British Prisoners in Syria, *The Times*, July 21 1941.

³⁵ Our Special Correspondent, “French Dupes in Syria,” *The Times*, July 11 1941.

fundamentally different ways, where no such distinction should be drawn. This leads to a denouncement of Vichy France as a whole:

To people capable of arguing like this words have ceased to have any meaning. Whether they are actually deceiving themselves does not perhaps matter very greatly. What is important is that Great Britain and the United States should not allow themselves to be deceived or confused. Vichy is not France, and does not represent the French nation ; but so long as it controls a great part of the French Empire and the French fleet, we must be prepared for any betrayal.

Totally discrediting the claims and terminology of Vichy France is a powerful move, and to additionally raise the question of whether or not they believe their own lies is even more so. But to claim that Vichy has nothing to do with what a British audience knows as France begs several very consequential questions that have occurred repeatedly: What is Vichy, if not France, and what is its relationship to French nationhood and identity? By this author's description, it seems to be only a military entity that happens to have access to a great deal of resources. This does have some element of truth; it would be difficult to argue historically that Vichy France had any coherent and unique sense of nationhood. However, it remains to be explained by this author what is "really French" and what exactly divides that from Vichy. As in previous cases, these differences are ignored to make a rhetorical argument.

Conclusion

In the early days of August, immediately after the ceasefire had been signed, Vichy French troops began being shipped out of the Levant. Through the next three years control of the Levant continued to be a source of friction between Churchill and de Gaulle, and by 1945 Syria

and Lebanon were both independent nations, freed from French rule. These two nations were some of the first in the process of decolonization that France underwent after the Second World War, which of course did nothing to allay de Gaulle's early concerns about the conflict being an excuse for British interference in French colonial holdings. Still, neither Syria nor Lebanon saw any further fighting in the remainder of the war.

On August 3, 1941, the *Times*' correspondent published a final article on the first stage of the Levant crisis, entitled "A Curiosity of History: Syrian Campaign Reviewed." The article makes a curious attempt at historical self-awareness, writing that the campaign will be remembered largely as "a curiosity of British military history" and makes no attempt to assess the social or historical significance, seeming to conclude that its only real consequence is as a proof of the strength of the British military and the success of the risks they took to secure the region. He declared that "...perhaps the deciding factor was the superior fighting efficiency of the British, Australian, and Indian forces." Like so many of the other pieces I have examined, it is impossible to tell what aspects are due to which pressures on the journalists, but it is difficult not to see strong effort being made to tell an acceptable story. The story that is produced out of the pressures of formal and informal censorship, desire to contribute to the war effort, and genuine confusion about how to reconcile a complicated political situation with a pre-war understanding of the world provides a great deal of insight into the thoughts and priorities of the British public during the Second World War, and is a greatly neglected resource in understanding that period.

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