

The National Library of Australia's French Second World War Collection

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It was a British colleague, John Flower, who first alerted me to the existence, in the National Library of Australia, of a substantial collection of documents relating to the French experience of the Second World War. He had come across it during a fellowship at the Humanities Research Centre in Canberra, and had for a time considered making a book out of it. Nothing came of that, but I was able to draw on a small part of the material for the anthology of texts I published later in the Methuen French Texts series, of which John Flower was the general editor.

All that took place thirty years ago. At the time of my own first perusal of the collection, in 1986, I was both impressed by the astonishingly comprehensive range of its content, and concerned that it was not only inadequately catalogued but in some danger of deterioration. (It was at that point stored in twenty-four mostly jam-packed elephant box files in the library basement, with little or no detailed description of the contents of each box.) I wrote to the then Director-General, Warren Horton, to make some suggestions about how the situation might be remedied. In his reply, while pleading inadequate resources to do the full cataloguing he agreed was desirable, he undertook to have done some basic sorting and bibliographic work.¹

Changes in my own academic journey over the ensuing years meant that I lost sight of the NLA collection, although I always had tucked at the back of my mind a desire to make it better known and a curiosity about how it came to be there and where it had come from.

¹ Horton, letter to the author, 22 December 1986, NLA P21/1/87.

In 2013 an opportunity arose which allowed me to revisit this unfinished business. The Library had decided to pay special attention to one of the more dramatic components of the collection, almost 100 broadsides (*affiches*) mainly from the Liberation period, and I was commissioned to write a piece about them for the Library's magazine.² This experience rekindled my determination to complete, as best I could, the task I had set myself so many years before. I must note that nothing had happened in the intervening decades to make that task less relevant: nobody else, it would seem, outside the Library at least, had shown any interest in the collection, though within the Library, as we shall see, Horton's promise to do some rationalising of the collection had been kept.

The most complete overall description of the content of the collection when it was acquired in 1967 is on a four-page handwritten document provided as clarification at the time of purchase. A more concise and user-friendly description was created by Assistant National Librarian Burmester in the first volume of his *Guide to the Collections* (1974):

1. 109 volumes of official documents, accounts, essays, novels and poems relating to the military, political, legal, economic, social and moral aspects of the war, its causes and its consequences
2. a. 'Collaborationist' and Nazi propaganda, in the form of issues of periodicals and newspapers
b. Pamphlets, bills, posters, etc.: 80 relating to the policy of the Vichy government; 27 relating to Nazi policy; 70 anti-League of Nations, anti-Freemasonry; anti-Communist, anti-Jewish, anti-Gaullist, anti-British and anti-United States; 6 radio broadcasts
3. Documents relating to the defeat, occupation and Resistance of France and to the ultimate phase of the war:
 - a. 3 pamphlets on the French Catholic clergy during the war
 - b. 5 anti-Vichy and anti-Pétain posters
 - c. French and allied clandestine sheets and periodicals
 - d. 32 pamphlets relating mainly to Resistance bodies
4. German and Austrian anti-war propaganda
 - a. 5 German anti-Nazi pamphlets
 - b. 47 fly-bills aimed at the morale of German soldiers

² The broadsides are now catalogued, preserved in plastic mylar pockets and housed in map-type cabinets, NLA ID 159497.

- c. Publications of the Freie Deutschland Movement; 29 numbers of *Volk und Vaterland*; 5 n^os of other periodicals; 46 pamphlets and fly-bills
5. Miscellaneous end-of-war publications:
 - a. 21 periodical issues
 - b. 99 posters
6. First publication of the texts published by the clandestine *Éditions de Minuit*, 25 vols, Paris, 1944–1945. Limited editions.

While these lists give a fair idea of the size and scope of the material, it is only when one begins to sift through the detail that one realises just how rich and complex it is. The generic mix is very considerable: there are books in great variety, both fiction and non-fiction, including the complete set of first public editions of work published by *Les Éditions de Minuit*;³ there are pamphlets, runs of newspapers and periodicals, posters, hand-bills and fly-bills. From a political perspective, there is representation of multiple viewpoints: Vichy and de Gaulle; Collaborationist; Communist, Catholic and other Resistance groups; there is even a number of German anti-Nazi documents. The collection as a whole is too much of a miscellany to constitute a ready-made story of the French experience of the Second World War. Rather, it is a kind of time-capsule containing myriad items, many of which were designed as ephemeral in their time, but each of which remains a pathway into a story that potentially interlinks with all of the others to allow one to build an understanding of the conflicts, ambiguities, and contradictions that confronted ordinary French people during those terrible years. And it is surely the survival of those ephemera, as much as the presence of so much graphic illustrative material, that gives the collection its emotional impact. So much of it comes across as raw testimony, de-historicised, re-invested with its immediacy and its simultaneity, its power to move and to shock.

By way of example, let us consider the two following sets of documents. Figure 1 shows the front and back pages of a scurrilous little eight-page booklet of so-called jokes, which are in fact all egregious examples of anti-allied propaganda.

³ These works are now housed in the Rare Books collection.



Sourire

The NLA World War II Collection, Ef 940.5344 W927/3

In both images, the cartoonist's 'strategy' is to identify Communism as ferocious (Stalin as the Russian bear) and cunningly brutish (the medical recruiting officers), while portraying its prey (Britain or the Russian female recruit) as attractive and vulnerable (though perhaps not entirely unwilling in the case of Britain). One could reasonably suggest that the cartoons' undeniable salaciousness exposes an exploitative attitude similar to what it purports to condemn, but this should not blind us to the fact that, in wartime France, the fear of Communism was real and widespread, notwithstanding (and sometimes because of) the resistance activities of the *PCF* (French Communist Party). This sentiment is more directly, and more urgently, expressed in another document from the same part of the collection, a small 'certificate', the front of which is decorated with a border of stars of David and the hammer and sickle symbol. It unfolds onto the following image and text:



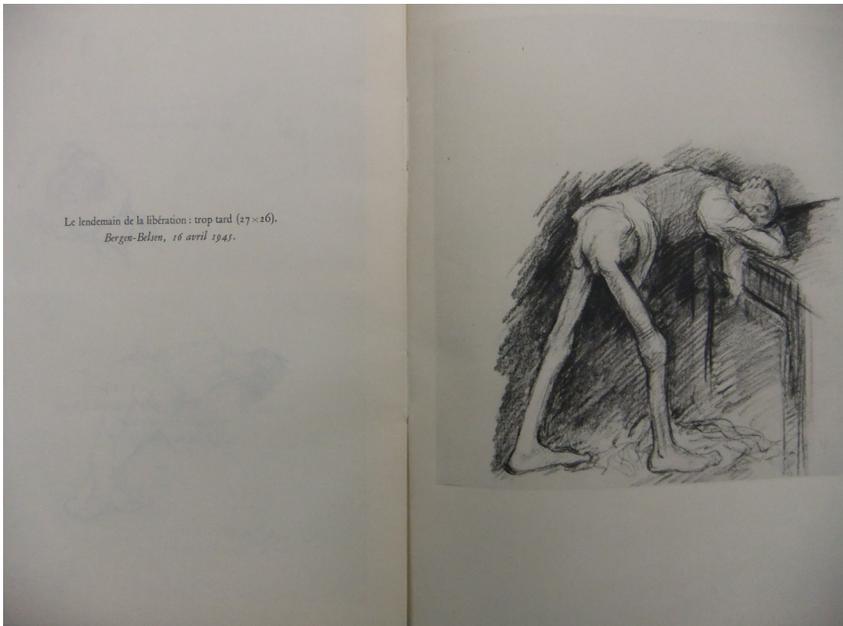
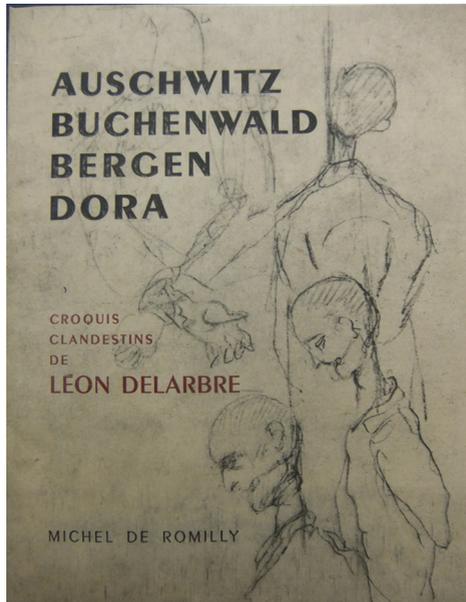
Certificat

The NLA World War II Collection, Ef 940.5344 W927/3

There is no indication of authorship of the certificate, but the convergence of its message⁴ (including the Star of David decorations) with the Vichy-Collaborationist ideology that equated Communism with Jewishness, and both with murderous bellicosity, is obvious.

It is startling, and troubling, to find juxtaposed with such images those found in a booklet of Léon Delarbre's clandestine drawings of his concentration camp experiences (Delarbre 1945).

⁴ 'I want to thank you wholeheartedly for having helped to hand over your country to bolshevism, thus contributing to the liquidation of its civilisation, its women and its children by my commissars.'



Delarbre Front Cover and Trop Tard
The NLA World War II Collection: Bib. ID 130931

The hanged men and the near naked man of Figure 3 have visual elements in common with Figures 1 and 2, yet the distance between Delarbré's spare testimony of horror and the propagandistic portrayal based on fear and ideological predisposition could hardly be greater. And it is precisely the irreconcilable nature of these strands of the French World War II experience that must be confronted and meditated upon by anyone who wishes to reach a balanced understanding of that experience.

Both of those strands have been subject to historical examination and contextualisation, as part of the long (and still continuing) examination of what Henry Rousso called '*un passé qui ne passe pas*'—'an ever present past' (Rousso and Conan 1994). Since Robert Paxton's pioneering work (Paxton 1972)⁵, many hundreds of books and films have appeared that probe the multitudinous facets of France's 1940 defeat, the turgid and turbulent years of the Occupation, and the many ambivalences of the Liberation period.⁶

What must be emphasised about the NLA Second World War collection is that its content lends itself much more to the complexities of the post-Paxton historiography rather than to the binary Resistance vs Collaboration narratives promoted by both Gaullists and Communists in the two decades following the war. As has already been mentioned, the NLA acquired the collection in 1967, when Patrick Modiano was yet to publish his first novel, or Marcel Ophüls to complete *Le chagrin et la pitié*.⁷ It is strange to realise that the NLA possessed so much material that, while it would all theoretically have been findable in France, would certainly not have been gathered in a single place.

How was the original collection assembled, and by whom? These are questions that will most likely remain unanswered. The NLA, through

⁵ The French translation, by Claude Bertrand, of Robert Paxton's book (*Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944*), *La France de Vichy* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1973) is widely acknowledged as ushering in the avalanche of revisionist historical studies of the period.

⁶ Collaborationist propaganda offers a less rich and less well-known bibliography than the Jewish question, and so it is worth mentioning Christian Desporte's 1993 *Les croquis de la propagande : dessinateurs et dessin politique sous l'Occupation* (Paris, CNRS Éditions).

⁷ Modiano's early fictional work and Ophüls' documentary are often seen as symbolic starting points of the historical revisionism analysed by Rousso and others.

its New York Liaison Officer,⁸ John Vaughan, bought it from H. P. Kraus Periodicals, a major New York book and manuscript dealer, but how Kraus acquired it remains a mystery. Kraus's autobiography offers some tantalizing hints about how his passion for rare mediaeval and Renaissance manuscripts led him to buy not just individual works, but sometimes the entire inventory of European bookshops (Kraus, 1978). As an Austrian Jewish escapee from the Hitler regime, Kraus would have had a personal interest in the contents of the collection sold to the NLA, but it is not unlikely that his purchase of it was part of something larger, more aligned with his central interests. To follow the trail further back would require painstaking research into Kraus's business papers, which has not to date been feasible. There is one piece of internal evidence that incites speculation: a considerable number of the posters in the broadside collection originated in the 6th *arrondissement* in Paris. Perhaps the original collector lived there? In any case, we owe a debt of gratitude to this unknown person for having assembled such a comprehensive and representative set of documents.

Many in Australia today, formed in a more inward-looking era than existed in the 1960s, might wonder about the relevance of such documentation in an Australian collection, but narrow interpretations of relevance have not always been dominant, and I would hope that we might one day regain something of the discernment of John Vaughan, the Library's New York Liaison Officer—and of the founding ideals of the Library—of being:

...a great Public Library on the lines of the world-famed Library of Congress at Washington; such a Library, indeed, as shall be worthy of the Australian Nation; the home of the literature, not of a State, or of a period, but of the world, and of all time. (Kenny 1984, 5)

Today, in the light of recent budgetary restrictions, such aspirations to world status might seem very distant. But the correspondence between Vaughan, White and Burmester⁹ shows that all were, at that time, highly sensitive

⁸ After the Second World War, the Library appointed Liaison Officers in both London and New York. A further position was established in Jakarta in 1971. Only the last survived the economic crisis of the 1970s (see Kenny, 1984.) The Jakarta position is now occupied by a locally appointed agent.

⁹ Vaughan to H. L. White (Attn Burmester), 31 January 1967, NLA NYNL 67/45; White to Vaughan, 8 February 1967, NLA PP 21/1/87.

to budgetary matters and, in respect to the World War II collection, considering the volume and the value of the various materials, the price of US\$800 paid must surely constitute an extraordinary bargain.

Vaughan's letter of 31 January 1967 refers, among other things, to a number of French-related items proposed by Kraus, beyond the World War II collection: there is a French Theatre collection, a Napoleonic collection, and French material in a collection of European Classics¹⁰. This does not, in my opinion, point to any francophile bias. French history and culture were valued in the Library's collection process because they were seen to be significant in the global concept of knowledge and understanding that the Library sought to make available to the Australian public.

I hope that what precedes will serve to whet the appetites of those scholars, students, and members of the public who are interested in the French experience of the Second World War. This is now a well-worked field of study, but as one who has spent many years working within it and writing about various aspects of it, I can testify that the NLA collection has lost none of the value I found in it 30 years ago. For those with little knowledge of the complexity of what France calls its 'dark years', the collection will be an informative, stimulating and accurate introduction; for those more familiar with the scholarship of the period, there is a wealth of material that will evoke the emotional tenor of the times with exceptionally dramatic directness; and, as has already been mentioned, many of the documents not only serve as lively illustrations of what is already known, but open new avenues of research.

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¹⁰ The Theatre Collection was eventually purchased, the Napoleonic Collection turned down. I did not follow up the 'classics'.

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