

French Engravers Postscript: Vichy Stamps

I hope you agree that we have spent a generous amount of time reviewing French landscape engravings on stamps, in our search for the world's most beautiful stamp. We have found one candidate — an engraved view of Lourdes. <<https://mancryfmf.files.wordpress.com/2023/04/other-french-engravers-3.pdf>>

However, before leaving these wonderful stamps and the engravers who created them, I feel duty-bound to address a related subject that has nothing to do with philatelic beauty; more like philatelic malfeasance. I'm talking about the French engravers who served the Vichy regime, Hitler's puppet state after the Nazis overran France in 1940.

The division of France during the Nazi occupation (1940-44) was confusing. I read a book on the subject and still don't quite get it. As I understand it, there was a zone around Paris that was officially Nazi-occupied; Italy also occupied part of France for a while. Then there was the so-called "sovereign" regime, under Marshal Philippe Petain, a WWI war hero ("The Lion of Verdun"), based in the sleepy spa city of Vichy in central France. This "nation" was supposed to be self-governing, though in reality it was servile to Hitler and complicit in his war against the Jews.

Finally, there was "Free France," a territory that existed mainly in the minds of Charles de Gaulle and the Resistance fighters who harried the occupiers night and day, through Liberation Day in 1944.



Hitler meeting Petain 1940



This could be history's most awkward and uncomfortable schmooze fest. Petain, left, joins Hitler, center and a guy who looks like Joachim von Ribbentrop, German foreign minister, probably in Hitler's train. What do you suppose they talked about in this, their only meeting?

Boundaries and Nazi protocols changed during the war. One thing stayed the same, though: French stamps dropped the banner, "Republique Francaise," instead deploying "Postes Francaises," "Postes France" or simply "France."

That's because the Nazis would not countenance the term "republic" associated with its defeated enemy, especially on philatelic emblems.

The courts and history have correctly judged Vichy officials as collaborators with the Nazis. After the war, some Vichy leaders were executed. Marshal Petain was 80 when he became Vichy chief of state. After the old marshal was tried and convicted of treason, De Gaulle and others decided to commute his sentence to life in prison. He died in 1951, age 95, on Ile d'Yeu, a citadel off the French Atlantic coast.

To live in France during WWII meant inevitable collaboration with the occupiers, sooner or later, in one way or another, large or small. Artists, professors, civil servants, commercants, butchers and bakers made their way as best they could. The levels of complicity and gradations of honor could muddle the judgment of Solomon.

What about stamp engravers? Some lay low during the war. Since military service wasn't an option — France was not at war, officially — choices were limited. You could try to leave France, or try to survive at home. Passive resistance, civil disobedience, covert warfare all were possibilities, but each entailed rising levels of risk, all with potentially disastrous outcomes.

Among the gradations of guilt assigned to French stamp engravers after the war, the most opprobrium attached to Pierre Gandon. His punishment was to be "blacklisted" from the team of stamp engravers.

What was Gandon's offense? He had produced the "French Tricolor Legion" stamps in 1942 (left), which became a symbol of the despised Vichy regime.

This was not the only "collaborationist" stamp produced by Gandon. There also was a



Gandon 1942

propaganda issue of 1944 (right), featuring Petain as a patron of agriculture. How quaint. Nice engraving, by the way.

Gandon ended up on the blacklist for just three months. He was the only engraver thus sanctioned, even though other engravers were equally "guilty" of collaboration with Vichy.



Gandon 1944



Portrait of Petain by Piel, 1941; by the way, do you think it's odd that the engravers should proudly sign their work for Vichy? I guess ego demands its tribute ...

France's premier engraving artists produced hagiographic portraits of Marshal Petain. Albert Decaris created a propaganda stamp like Gandon's in 1944. There were landscape stamps, portraits, coat-of-arms stamps and more, including surtax stamps for things like prisoners of war, French seamen, and Marshal Petain's National Relief Fund.

Some engravers managed to stay out of the propaganda business while still keeping busy. Cheffer produced non-postal labels for the annual stamp show, with surcharges for charity projects. Serres also limited himself to non-postal charity labels and souvenir sheets for stamp exhibitions.

Mazelin was a major contributor to the Vichy philatelic catalogue, producing

stamps for the French territories of Algeria, Dahomey, French Sudan, Niger and Senegal. (They were never put on sale.) Piel was also active during the Vichy years. Serres and Cottet, too, contributed stamps or labels during the Vichy period.

Were there varying degrees of enthusiasm among the engravers? Did they manage to stay morally neutral to rationalize their service to Vichy? Did some artists bend to the will of Petain — and Hitler — because they were coerced? Did some collaborate voluntarily? If they had resisted, refused assignments and commissions, would they have escaped retribution? One of their number, Claude Hertenberg, was imprisoned for most of the war. What did he do to deserve such punishment, while his fellow engravers went scot-free? Was service to the Vichy regime their price of freedom? All these questions!



Portrait of Petain by Mazelin 1943



Portrait of Petain by Mazelin, 1944
A remarkable engraving.



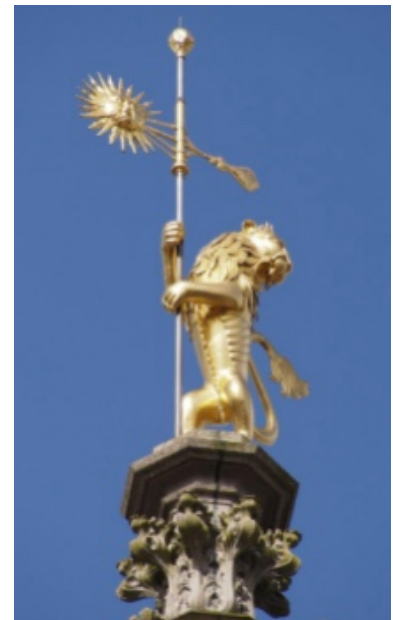
Before leaving this sensitive subject, let's examine one more stamp. This is a landscape of a landmark, specifically the belfry and town hall of Arras (left). Issued in 1942, it is inscribed simply "Postes Francaises," in keeping with Vichy (and Nazi) dictates. The stamp depicts the tower that commands the hill above Arras, with its breathtaking view of the city and surrounding valley. The remarkable structure was begun in 1463, during the reign of Philip the Good, and not completed until 1554. The tower was destroyed during World War I, but rebuilt as a symbol of civic freedoms and independence (at least according to Wikipedia). In 2015 the French picked it as their favorite monument partly because of the gilded lion at its pinnacle. Each year it is illuminated, to thrilling effect.

Now take a close look at the stamp above. Created by Gabriel Antoine Barlangue (1874-1956), it presents a startling view of the tall building. Set against a bright sky, the tower darkens as it rises, floor by floor, until it is just a silhouette at the top. The famous gilded lion can hardly be seen. Perhaps I am too eager to find examples of resistance, but I can't help thinking M.

Barlangue was sending a coded message with his darkened tower, even as civic freedoms and independence were shrouded in Vichy France. This eclipse was the very opposite of the lights that now

bathe the tower I'm a little surprised that the Goebbels Nazi propaganda machine didn't pick up on this act of engraved civic resistance, scuttle the stamp before it was issued, and dispatch M. Barlangue to a death camp.

It's hard to sit in judgment in most of these cases. What would you or I have done? The pastoral dream of Vichy France masked a nightmare world of crazy mirrors, subterfuge, betrayal and other horrors. Survival may not have been heroic, but there is something to be said for those who lived to engrave another day.



THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES