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What if we just started over? The French Press during World War II

By Ross Collins

Sometimes those of us exasperated by media sensationalism and bias may like to muse: what would it be like if we could just shut down every publication in the country and start over from scratch? Of course, that's impossible. Yet it actually happened once, and not that long ago. It may be one of journalism history's most amazing events, yet perhaps not well known among a young generation of American historians. On September 30, 1944, the government of France simply eliminated every periodical published across the entire country. Every office, of every daily, of every weekly, of every printed product, c'est fini—some 2,500 titles in all.



To feel the magnitude of such a decree, one might speculate on how a large country such as, say, the United States might react if every title, including the *New York Times*, *Parade* magazine, the *Laramie Boomerang*, even *Linn's Stamp News*, simply ceased to exist.

The French decree made shortly after the country's liberation was designed to create what French press historians call the "table raze." All periodicals which began publishing after the defeat of 1940 were finished. All periodicals which continued to publish in the occupied half of the country were also eliminated. All periodicals which continued to publish after Vichy France, roughly the southern half of the country, was occupied in November 1942 were also done for. Press property was seized by the state.

This meant most every periodical in print, although some non-political periodicals and a few important newspapers which had fled Paris for Vichy France in 1940 were eventually allowed to reappear. Many of these had voluntarily "scuttled themselves," to use the French term, after German occupying censors demanded they disavow the allied invasion of North Africa.

Most obvious of an old title allowed to reappear was *Le Figaro*, today one of Paris' largest dailies. Most obvious of an old title not allowed to reappear was *Le Temps*, a venerable Paris daily still used today by students as a French equivalent in authority of the *Times* of London or the *New York Times*.

That *Le Temps* was "collaborationist" and therefore eliminated is not the whole story. In fact, Charles De Gaulle's government of former resistance leaders set the deadline for elimination of Vichy newspapers at 15 days after November 11, 1942. This meant *Le Temps* fell under the guillotine by a scant three days, having appeared until November 29. No coincidence: the government targeted this daily for its ties to a powerful steel trust. The "table raze" was designed to eliminate not only collaborators, but the pre-war power of big money to influence journalism. To replace *Le Temps* a new, government-sponsored but journalist-controlled daily appeared, *Le Monde*. Authorization to publish was given first to clandestine newspapers which hazarded illegal publication during the occupation, second to newspapers which had "scuttled" themselves during the occupation, and third to new titles launched by former resistance fighters.

This idealistic plan to purify the press from taint of capital, and to distribute titles to a marketplace of ideas both left and right, failed. By the end of the decade many titles had disappeared, and the power of money and competition had edged back onto the familiar road of private industry.

(Excerpt from a book review of *The Authorized Press in Vichy and German-Occupied France*, 1940-1944. A Bibliography. Donna Evleth, compiler. Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press, 1999, in <u>American Journalism</u> 18 [2001].)

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