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# Introduction 1940

## First Months: October to December

By the time Madeleine began writing her diary in October 1940, Paris had been under German occupation for four months. October 1st, was, she wrote, an appropriate time to start writing it because it marked the return to work after the long summer break. It was the *rentrée* for workers, for schoolchildren, students and their teachers and lecturers. October 1940 also signalled the *rentrée* and the return to daily routine for the hundreds of thousands of French people and Parisians who had joined the *exode* – the panicked flight to the south of the country in the face of the German onslaught the previous May. Madeleine had been among those who fled the capital. By July she had returned and by the autumn she was preparing – with some excitement – for what she hoped would be a resumption of scholarly routine and reinstatement of the scholarly purpose for which she had come to Paris in 1939. The occupying authorities wanted a rapid return to routine and normality so as to shore up support for the armistice and for the new system of government – unique in Europe – which saw the French state enter into formal and peaceable cooperation with the enemy occupier to govern the country. The French republic had been dissolved and replaced by an ostensibly independent sovereign state governing a free, unoccupied zone in the south of the country. Based in the spa town of Vichy, the political apparatus conceived in connivance and collaboration with the Nazis was led by First World War veteran and war hero Philippe Pétain. Newspapers and newsreels focussed on persuading the population of the sense, wisdom and desirability of the policy of collaboration. For the most part, civilians went with it. A resumption of normal life, of familiar routines and work patterns under a trusted leader, was welcomed by many after months on the road and seemed preferable to more death and destruction; in that regard especially, there was a readiness to listen to the cautioning of Great War hero Pétain. There was no Resistance movement to speak of in these early months of occupation. The first

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Resistance bulletins had been produced sporadically in the autumn of 1940, but armed resistance was negligible and uncoordinated and would remain so until networks formed around greater numbers of recruits by the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943. Charles de Gaulle's defiant BBC broadcast from London made on 18 June 1940 had been heard by very few amid the chaos and upheaval of the *exode*. There was little, in the first months of occupation, to divert the focus away from getting on with life the best one could.<sup>5</sup>

The first weeks of the diary show the keenness and urgency of Madeleine and of her student entourage to reintegrate with their scholarly routines and the difficulties they faced in doing so. Madeleine's diary entries are dominated by anxiety about the lack of money and by tales of fellow students forced to abandon their studies and return home to support their families. Madeleine gives precious insight into the range of practical difficulties she had to overcome and, also, the nature of the support and saving recourse she was able to call upon. Accommodation was problematic in the early months. No longer in receipt of her grant and without access to funds in her blocked bank account, Madeleine could not afford to stay at the boarding house, *Les Marronniers*. She had taken lodgings at her aunt's in the suburbs, but she moved from there into an apartment belonging to a British expatriate, a 'Miss Longhurst', who had fled south to the free zone. When Ruth Camp, the Canadian friend with whom she shared the apartment, was arrested and interned in December 1940, she was forced to move from there too and decided to find herself a 'bohemian' flat of her own, which she could ill afford. Despite financial uncertainties, which had convinced her to register for an English degree in addition to the doctorate to guarantee employability as a secondary school teacher, she was intent on living a life as an independent woman scholar within the intellectual community of women she had been a part of since the Phoney War. One of the most influential figures in this milieu was the bookseller, publisher and literary muse Sylvia Beach, whose bookshop and lending library *Shakespeare & Co* was a meeting place and intellectual forum for young, mainly female, Paris students. Beach became an increasingly important figure in Madeleine's life later in the Occupation (see 1942 and 1943), but already, in the first months, she was helping Madeleine with food, money and lodgings. It had been through Beach that Madeleine had found her temporary address at 4 rue Rollin, and Beach paid the gas and electricity bills when Madeleine had to move out, helping her through the first months in her new apartment with loans of money.

The arrest of Ruth Camp in December 1940 had a significant bearing on how Madeleine engaged with the military occupation. Ruth's arrest so alarmed her

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<sup>5</sup> There are a number of useful general histories of the Occupation which provide insightful and engaging overviews of the public response to Occupation in the early months in both Paris and the provinces. See especially Diamond (1999), Jackson (2001), Laborie (1990 & 2001) and Vinen (2007).

that she wrote that she thought it prudent from then on to make no mention of what she described as ‘political matters.’ Until this point, she had seemed relatively comfortable in relating the defiance of the Sorbonne and had not shied away from describing in detail what she had seen and heard of the student-led protest against Vichy at Étoile on Armistice Day, which had resulted in violence, mass arrests of students and the temporary closure of the Sorbonne. However, so fearful was she that she might be vulnerable to arrest herself, she avoided overt references to the war until the summer of 1943, by which time there was a generalised confidence among the French public that the arrival of the allies and a long-awaited liberation was not far away. The first months of Madeleine’s diary are an intriguing glimpse of a life accommodating change fraught with challenges and difficulties. The entries tell us about how the shortages of food and fuel were already a problem in the autumn and winter of 1940 but not yet dominating everyday life. In the early months, Madeleine was more concerned about how the war and Occupation might disrupt her studies. She was positive and cheerful, chattily relating news of the first rationing measures and the first experience of winter cold without heating with an almost juvenile excitement. She wrote of the improvised dishes she concocted with make-do ingredients or ersatz replacements. She described with amusement the many layers of clothing she had to wear to keep warm in bed at night and about the changes in daily routine – going to bed early and rising late – enforced by the bitter cold. Four years later, there was no such jocularity. Four years of struggle to survive the daily misery of cold and malnutrition did not make for levity. It is nonetheless interesting that the first months of Occupation, before the impact of shortages began to be felt, were lived for the most part with no great evidence of distress or trauma. Madeleine, like those students around her at the Sorbonne, was primarily concerned with getting her life back on track.

In these first months, more than at any time in the diary, Madeleine gives an insight into how the Sorbonne encountered and adjusted to the new regime in its first academic year under occupation. Already, in letters written in the autumn of 1939 and the spring of 1940, Madeleine had painted a picture of recalcitrance and defiance among the Sorbonne’s lecturing staff, who were, for the most part, septuagenarian veterans of the Great War who were ‘holding the fort’ in the absence of younger colleagues conscripted to the front. The over-confident and bellicose attitude of these academics in May and June 1940 and their determination that students should stay to finish their year of study may have been partly responsible for Madeleine’s lack of urgency to leave the capital in June (Michallat, 2012: 135–153). There were signs that the same attitudes had carried through to the autumn of 1940 in Madeleine’s descriptions of defiant and moving speeches made by Joseph Vendryès, the Dean of the Arts Faculty. Indeed, the Vichy authorities assumed that students and staff had connived over the student protests at Etoile on 11 November 1940. The rector Roussy was sacked and Vendryès was suspended from his post on several occasions over the course of the war. There was nothing for Madeleine to

report in respect of organised student resistance in 1940, even though students were already secretly organising into a network and producing the newspaper *Defense de la France* in the basement of the Sorbonne. The student cohort for 1940/41 was significantly depleted. Men of university age were also of military age and had been conscripted, and many were now being held as prisoners in Germany. In his traditional address at the start of the academic year, Joseph Vendryès stated that of the 5000 students who had registered for courses at the Sorbonne in 1940, women were in the majority and would, he declared, be at the forefront of driving the Sorbonne forward with their ‘courage, tenacity and intellectual verve’. Even though women went to the Sorbonne in numbers in 1939, Madeleine’s diary talks of a number of them dropping out or being forced to return to the provinces or the colonies. In the absence of fathers and brothers, young women were under greater pressure to support the home and family through domestic and workplace labour. This pressure, compounded by the spiralling cost of living, which made independent living and full-time study impossibly expensive for many, persuaded many women to abandon their studies.<sup>6</sup>

The autumn and winter of 1940 are not especially difficult to live through for Madeleine. Although there are shortages of certain food items and disruption to the study routine at the Sorbonne, she lives relatively comfortably, unmoled by the authorities. Nonetheless, she is tense, anxious and frightened and the arrest of Ruth gives insight into the vulnerability and fear she feels as a British student in an enemy state.

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<sup>6</sup> See Michallat 2017 article on the student diary of Madeleine Blaess in *Essays in French Literature & Culture* for more on student life at the Sorbonne in the early months of the Occupation.

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