



Mentalité Terrible

Paris now enters a dark night, the darkest, longest fifty months of all her long existence.

—Alistair Horne, *The Seven Ages of Paris*

Every evening since the year AD 358, when the Romans settled on a small, leafy island in the middle of the Seine, the Parisian sky had sheltered her people. For over one thousand five hundred years, as they had endured conquests, upheavals, and revolutions, this particular sky had labored—carefully selecting and adorning herself in delicate shades of blue, purple, pink and orange, positioning her clouds just so, summoning a meticulously measured amount of light—to seep comfort into Parisians.

But on a warm evening in June of 1944, the sky—looking particularly lovely in a shade somewhere between china blue and robin's-egg, strewn with scalloped clouds, shedding a soothing amber glow—could not permeate the fear inside her people.

René Psarolis was seven years old in the summer of 1944. This is the city in which he lived.

Hitler had been in power in Europe for over eleven years. Goebbels, Göring, and their agents had been ruling Paris for four. Fear, like static electricity, was everywhere.

With no credible newspapers, Parisians learned of events through word of mouth. One woman had seen a lorry piled high with corpses cruise down Boulevard Sebastopol, a group of boys had seen an old man trip on an outstretched jackboot and have his head blown off. French gendarmes had been seen marching into schools and coming out herding groups of children.



The worst crackdown had begun in the spring. Green trucks rolled over the pavement and cobblestones at a deliberate crawl, like angry, salivating beasts. The helmeted soldiers standing in them, guns at the ready, were indeed trolling for prey. Anyone aiding downed British or American airmen? Shot. Assisting the Résistance? Shot. Listening to the BBC? Reading a clandestine newspaper? Taking a photograph? Shot. Using forged rationing coupons, violating curfew, being in the wrong place at the wrong time . . .

In the month of March alone, 4,746 people had been arrested; by June, many people stayed home, and those who ventured out moved like robots. Place de l'Opera was vacant but for an occasional shiny black Mercedes with swastika snapping in the sun, and officers' arms resting on the edge; a few horse drawn carts and battered bicycles. Panzer tanks rumbled down the Champs d'Élysées, packed with men in black uniforms whose berets' SS insignias clashed with pink cherry blossoms lining the avenue.

Paris had to piece together her self-portrait; she could no longer see herself. Whispered across café counters, mumbled along sidewalk queues, and discussed as people leaned across balconies, each new rumor that rippled through the city seemed more atrocious than the last:

At Gestapo headquarters on Avenue Foch and rue des Saussies, screams and shots were heard every evening now.

French were increasingly turning in fellow French to face nightly firing squads, inside these headquarters, which were indistinguishable from the neighboring apartments—white stone, wrought-iron balconies in neat, tidy rows—but for shutters closed to block the light and contain the darkness within. Inside were iron bars, stark rooms, instruments of torture, and of course, echoes of screams.



This created what was known as *mentalité terrible*, when even long time friends and family members began to distrust each other. Desperation drove many to become informers, collaborators flaunted their new bicycles, thick coats, sugar, meat. Political beliefs collided as Communists clashed with Résistants. Tempers flared, and, for the first time since the revolutions, the general term *citoyens* no longer referred to Parisians as a cohesive group.

The Germans, foreigners, had been a threat from the beginning, showing sharper teeth steadily as time passed. Now the danger was the person one brushed past on the street, the neighbor whose eyes had suddenly become shifty, the uncle whose table had radiated welcome each Sunday. People drew into themselves, snails squeezing into tight shells.

Résistants and Communists were being executed in the woods near Mont Valérien.

Three or four victims at a time would be lashed to posts and face a long line of Germans glaring down the barrels of rifles. 11,000 were killed in the cellars of Château Vincennes and the woods of Mont Valerien.



After the Allied landing in Normandy, some towns had tried to liberate themselves and received terrible reprisals—hangings from balconies, trees, lampposts.

In one such town, Oradour-sur-Glane, in the Haute-Vienne, the Germans massacred everyone: 642 people. The men were machine-gunned down, the women and children shoved into the church and burnt alive before the town was razed to the ground.

The Allies were bombing the industrial outskirts of Paris at a frenzied, furious pace.

On April 21, 1944, a barrage of bombs had decimated the La Chapelle district in the 18th arrondissement. There was a deafening racket, and then cups bounced on counters, photos hopped on mantles, chandeliers swung from the ceiling. The sirens and blasts screamed in alternating rhythm.

Afterward, the night sky glowed red with what seemed a million crackling torches which illuminated the dead bodies of over six hundred men, women and children. The area was a mountain range of debris—steel beams, crushed stone, tree branches, bed frames. Apartment buildings were blown to bits, façades had gigantic, ragged holes, windows had no glass, entire walls hung precariously. Corpses of all sizes were spread out like rag dolls.



The next day, it was all gray dust except for a yellow shirt with its sleeves spread; or a red sofa, coils springing out, stuffing spilling onto the rubble; or a dead orange-striped cat. Fires flickered everywhere and the stench conjured images of hell. People tended each other's burns, gashes and broken limbs, or stood in stunned silence, smelling the burning wood, appliances, and flesh, holding bags of whatever belongings they'd managed to salvage, and staring at the wallpaper, crown molding and fireplace mantles which were suddenly exposed. Their homes were *kaputt*, as the Germans would say.

The danger in the streets came from the desperation of the cornered beast, for the Germans knew that the Allies had landed at Normandy. The danger from the skies came from the Allies ferocious attempts to stop the war machine, not always perfectly aimed.

The Germans were killing the Jews they'd taken.

Two years previously, in what was known as the *grand rafle*, over 13,000 Jews had been arrested, herded into the Velodrome d'Hiver cycling stadium, crammed onto cattle trains and rolled off to camps. The next year, a roundup in February seized hundreds of children. One school in the Marais lost 500 students.

Since then, thousands of Jews and political deportees had been sent to camps in France—Drancy, Beaune-la-Rolande, Pithiviers, Compiègne—or on to Germany.

Few Jews were left in Paris, and the Marais was like a ghost town with its boarded up shops and empty, looted apartments.

It was said that in Le Struthof (Natzweiler, in German) camp in the Vosges Mountains in Alsace, behind a beautiful, old stone fence, there stood a whitewashed building with windows boarded up that was used as a human oven.



The fate of those missing was beginning to dawn on Parisians.

Men were disappearing off the streets, taken to Germany to work.

An official program had been in place, *Service du Travail Obligatoire*, which allowed the "requisition" and transfer of hundreds of thousands of French workers to Germany to work in camps, factories, farms and railroads. By June, this requisitioning consisted of snatching able-bodied men off the streets with no questions asked. Men disappeared without a trace.

No more meat would come into Paris again and people were dying of starvation.

Even dogs and cats were eaten. Children grew so slowly that their bodies were unable to summon puberty.

The previous winter had seen the end of coal; babies had frozen to death in cradles, the elderly in their beds. Electricity and gas were rarely on, maybe a half-hour a day. Mothers were petrified that their children would starve, fathers panicked when they were out of sight of their families, even children feared to play freely on their own street.

The sky, now streaked with darkening lavender and mauve, with the last golden sunlight of the day outlining the edges of clouds, was helpless to protect her people from the harrowing certainty that the rumors were true.



Links

April 21, 1944 bombing of La Chapelle:

<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=830546>

Nazi-Occupied Paris (archival footage)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yv8mEbgGZIY>

Books

"Suite Française" by Irène Némirovsky

"And the Show Went On: Cultural Life in Nazi-Occupied Paris" by Alan Riding