

Preface

It is sometimes easier to explain what a book is not about before stating its purpose. This is very definitely not another study of de Gaulle, the Free French and the troublesome relations they enjoyed with their British hosts, although inevitably the name of the general appears repeatedly in the text. Countless words have already been spilt on these subjects, and it is likely that more will follow, if only to satiate the curiosity of a British public which, astonishingly, still seems surprised that Churchill and the Free French leader were not always the best of allies.¹ Nor is this another account of those secretive and murky relations that the Vichy government conducted with the Foreign Office during 1940–42. This, too, has been an overworked topic, maybe in an effort to counter those disingenuous and tedious arguments continuously peddled by unreconstructed Pétainists in France who claim their hero was involved in a double game with the Germans, outwardly proclaiming his adherence to collaboration while secretly negotiating with Churchill to shield the French people from greater suffering, thus deserving to be counted among the pioneers of resistance. It should be further stressed that this is not primarily an examination of those writers and thinkers, most notably Raymond Aron and André Labarthe, who made London their temporary home in 1940. To be fair, we still await a synthesis of French intellectual activity in wartime London, just as we need an overall account of exiled intellectuals in Britain's capital. We are, though, well served by the autobiographies of the protagonists themselves, and there is no shortage of biographical studies of the most prominent exiled figures, French and otherwise. And, finally, this is not an attempt to write the response of British public opinion to events in France. So dramatic were the ups and downs of the Vichy regime that the reactions within Britain have been

amply mapped out, their subsequent course well plotted, and their importance recorded at every twist and turn.

All this the book is not. It is instead an exploration of the lives of those French men, women and children who discovered themselves, usually by happenstance ahead of design, on British shores in May–June 1940. These communities constitute what I have termed the ‘forgotten French’, repeatedly ignored by historians who have preferred to concentrate on de Gaulle and other more visible exile groups whose experiences have been deemed of greater significance. Crudely speaking, the ‘forgotten French’ comprised the following: some 4,000 refugees jostled out of northern France by the battering of Guderian’s Panzers; maybe 12,000 stranded servicemen, principally sailors, survivors of Narvik and Dunkirk and those unlucky enough to be arrested in British ports at the time of Mers-el-Kébir, who would not be returned home until the close of the year; an indeterminate number of Vichy officials, possibly 200 or so consular and mission staff, together with their wives and families, left behind to keep the wheels of petty bureaucracy turning, despite the breaking off of diplomatic relations between Britain and Vichy; and a French colony of 12,000 strong, which decided to stay put on British soil, despite the fact that maybe 18,000 *colons* chose to return home with the outbreak of war or at some point during the *drôle de guerre*.

The objective of this book is, then, to lift these groups out of obscurity – to scrutinise their existence, to assess the material conditions in which they lived and to probe their concerns, which were as much to do with social issues as they were to do with political ones. An underlying aim is also to monitor how the British government and public reacted to these strangers in their midst, foreigners who, unlike the Norwegians, Poles and Belgians, did not possess a government-in-exile, thus raising doubts about their loyalty to the Allied cause.

If there exists any burning need to depose the myth that Britain was a welcoming haven for those retreating from Nazi oppression on the Continent, then much evidence may be uncovered in the pages that follow. While the public often displayed charity and sympathy, even if it was only doling out a cup of tea, a beverage the French did not take kindly to, government officials at all levels were far less indulgent, and at times it is difficult not to avoid the conclusion that Whitehall would much have preferred it if the ‘forgotten French’ had stayed in France, or at least had joined their cousins in North America, where there existed a huge colonist community, and where they would have been

out of view, their incomprehensible arguments a concern for the State Department rather than the Foreign Office. More fundamentally, this book helps lay the myth, cultivated by de Gaulle at the time and believed by many since, notably a British public that readily identified itself with the general's courage and isolation in 1940, that the French in Britain, notwithstanding some obvious exceptions, constituted a homogeneous group who had quickly rallied to the cause of the general and, as such, deserve to be counted among the 'resisters of the first hour'. This book demonstrates that this explanation will simply not do. The 'forgotten French' were extremely varied in their response to events and displayed a strong wariness of de Gaulle himself. In this respect, this study mirrors the approach that historians have increasingly adopted in their research into occupied France. No longer are the key concerns the high politics of Vichy–German relations, the ins and outs of collaborationist politics at Paris, the interminable intrigues of the corridors of power at Vichy and the workings of the Resistance movements; instead, historians have chosen to look at the history of the Occupation from the bottom up. Just as historians of Nazi Germany have become obsessed with *Alltagsgeschichte*, 'the history of daily life', *la vie quotidienne* has likewise become the central concern for researchers into Vichy France.

Viewed through these prisms, the 'forgotten French' constitute far more than a footnote in the history of the Second World War. An examination of their lives reveals much about of the splintering of French opinion during the war. Many of the attitudes that have been identified in metropolitan France, in the different zones created by the Germans, may also be found among the exiles in Britain. Pétainism, in particular, crossed the Channel alongside the refugees and servicemen, while Gaullism struggled to put down roots, even among communities one might have thought indulgent and sympathetic to the general, and it is not difficult to perceive similarities between the popular anti-Gaullism of the Fourth and Fifth Republics and that articulated in wartime Britain. The experiences of the 'forgotten French' also reveal much about the business of exile, something the French especially have never warmed to, even though they have regularly made Britain their temporary home at moments of crisis in their country's history, for instance in the aftermath of the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Revolution of 1789, and those upheavals of 1830, 1848 and 1871. As David Thomson observed in his 1951 profile of de Gaulle, 'Exiles, even those who have courageously

sought voluntary exile in order to continue the battle for their country's honour and liberation, have usually acquired a mentality which, though completely understandable and humanly forgivable, calls for constant patience and imaginative sympathy on the part of their hosts.²

Such a mentality was indeed adopted by the 'forgotten French', men, women and children who generally had not chosen to advance the fight by settling in Britain, and who were not well cut out for life abroad, even in a country as geographically close to France as Britain, thus contributing to an uncomfortable mix of cultures. It was fortunate both for the 'forgotten French' and their British hosts that, often unbeknown to one another, they shared a set of common values, and appreciated that these could only be fulfilled with the ultimate defeat of Nazism.

Notes

- 1 S. Berthon, *Allies at War* (London, Collins, 2000).
- 2 D. Thomson, *Two Frenchmen. Pierre Laval and Charles de Gaulle* (London, The Cresset Press, 1951), p. 168.