

Paris – The Vel' d'Hiv roundup

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Inaugurated in 1910 on rue Nélaton in the 15th arrondissement of Paris, the Vélodrome d'Hiver or "Vel' d'Hiv" was an indoor arena that hosted popular sporting events. This vast space had already become an internment camp with deplorable living conditions in May 1940, detaining thousands of German women living in France.

The "Final Solution" in France

At the behest of the Germans, the first mass arrests of Jewish men took place in the spring and summer of 1941, and a first convoy of Jews left for Auschwitz on 27 March 1942. The anti-Jewish persecution increased in 1942 with the implementation of the "Final Solution". Following the Wannsee conference in Berlin on 20 January, it was decided in June to extend this to Western Europe. In France, it began in July, after the yellow star was introduced in May.

The roundup

Following negotiations between the collaborationist Vichy regime and the Nazi authorities, massive raids were organised which first targeted foreign Jews. Drawing from the file created in autumn of 1941 by the Prefecture of Police of Paris, the operation was carried out on July 16 and 17. It mobilised more than 4500 French police officers (no contribution was made by the Germans) in Paris and the surrounding area: nearly 13 000 people were arrested, including 3000 men and 6000 women both foreign and stateless, and 4000 children, most of whom had been born in France and were therefore French.

Rounded up at dawn, those arrested were "sorted" into improvised assembly centres: adults without children were sent to Drancy, and families were penned in at the Vel' d'Hiv in inhuman conditions for five days.

A relative failure?

While outrageous, the numbers are but a third of what had been planned by the Germans and Vichy: warned by neighbours, police officers or the drivers of requisitioned buses, many people were able to hide. But the arrests would continue in the following days and until summer of 1944 (1200 people in total). Many Jews crossed the demarcation line and either went into hiding or joined the Resistance. Some of them were then arrested.

Deportation

From the Vel' d'Hiv, the detained were taken to Drancy or the camps in the Loiret. Deported a few days later to Auschwitz, they were then exterminated. The children brought to the Loiret were separated from their mothers, then taken in turn to Drancy in mid-August, and deported from there to be immediately assassinated.

The consequences

The Vel' d'Hiv roundup was the most significant operation of its kind in the Holocaust in the West. While it was applauded by the collaborationist press, the Germans were aware of the relative failure of the operation. It created a veritable wave of shock and protest amongst the population. People showed solidarity with the victims. The facts were disseminated by the Resistance and the BBC, which drew even more condemnation, with the exiled author Thomas Mann describing them in his radio broadcast. The Vel' d'Hiv roundup and the raids that followed in the unoccupied zone in August lead to the "awakening of the Christian conscience", illustrated by the stances taken by some

clergymen. Entirely emptied on 22 July 1942, the building very quickly returned to its original purpose.

A raid without pictures

A single picture exists of the facts, showing buses parked in front of the entrance to the Vel' d'Hiv: taken by a photograph from the collaborationist press in the early afternoon on 16 July, it went unpublished after the German censors intervened. Some photographs taken during the Liberation, showing collaborationists being detained in the building, were used – misleadingly – to illustrate the roundup of July 1942.

The Vel' d'Hiv immediately following the war

After the war, the Vel' d'Hiv hosted sporting and political events. But in 1958 it was used as a detention facility for French Muslims of Algeria, under the authority of prefect Maurice Papon.

The history and memory of the roundup are first characterised by "forgetting" the responsibility of the French authorities: only the most zealous police officers were purged. However, as soon as the war was over, families, survivors and associations could be seen gathering in front of the building on the anniversary date: the mood was both communist and communal. The building was torn down in 1959.

A major place of memory for the Holocaust in France

Under the pressure of public opinion, the commemoration of the raids progressively became an official ceremony. In 1992, a French president was present for the first time; François Mitterrand, heckled by the crowd for not recognising the role played by France. It was only in 1995 that Jacques Chirac found the long-awaited words: "Yes, it is true that the criminal insanity of the occupying forces was supported by some French people and the French State. [...] France, on that day, committed an irreparable act. It failed to keep its word and delivered those under its protection to their executioners." By recognising the responsibility of France – and not just that of the French state – in the persecution and deportation of French Jews, Chirac definitively made the victims a part of national remembrance. Since then, successive French presidents have regularly been present at the annual ceremony, which takes place at the memorial erected on the banks of the Seine in 1994.

Against denial

In 2008, multilingual explanatory panels were placed in the Bir Hakeim subway station, which serves the Vélodrome. A monument listing the interned children as well as a new plaque are there recount the facts since 2017 and 2018, respectively. After early initial studies, the Vel' d'Hiv roundup is now well-documented. This historiography makes it possible to counter allegations made by certain people, who for instance claimed during the 2022 presidential campaign that Pétain had protected French Jews: the roundup and its consequences are clear proof of the contrary.

Further reading

Joly, Laurent, *L'État contre les Juifs – Vichy, les nazis et la persécution antisémite*, Paris, 2018.

Joly, Laurent, *La rafle du Vel d'Hiv – Paris, juillet 1942*, Paris, 2022.

Traube, Anna, *Évadée du Vél' d'Hiv'*, Paris, 2006.

Lichtsztejn-Montard, Sarah, *Chassez les papillons noirs. Récit d'une survivante des camps de la mort nazis*, Paris, 2011.

Les guichets du Louvre, film by Michel Mitrani, 1974

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfPTiJH0bJo> ; after the book of the same name by Roger Boussinot, Paris, 1960).