

Sigmaringen – When the French capital was on the banks of the Danube

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Paris, the capital of France – a self-evident fact? For approximately seven months, the government or what considered itself as such was headquartered in another town, called Sigmaringen. Located 80 kilometres south of Stuttgart, it calls back to one of the darkest chapters of Franco-German history: the occupation of France by the Germans during the Second World War, and the Collaboration, which for many French people meant joining forces with the occupier. Sigmaringen was not included in this chapter until September 1944, but then played a role until April 1945. What happened?

The final phase of the Franco-German war

Once the German troops had occupied all of France in early summer of 1940, the Marshal Philippe Pétain offered them collaboration – in exchange, the Germans would give him free reign in the southern zone that remained under French administration; the seat of the government was located in Vichy, in the centre of the country. In what was known as the "*zone libre*" ("free zone"), Marshal Pétain was at the head of an authoritarian regime, which in some aspects resembled Nazi Germany, especially when it came to the dangers facing the Jewish population. When the wind changed during the year 1944 due to the Allied landing, the German occupiers left France, bringing the Pétain government with them to the East. But where to, exactly?

The core of the Collaboration

On 8 September 1944, a convoy of vehicles arrived in Sigmaringen: its passengers, including Pétain and some of his ministers, were set up in the town's castle, which had been commandeered by the Nazis. Who were these Frenchmen living in Sigmaringen until 22 April 1945, pretending to govern France? The German occupiers had left French soil a long time ago; the General Charles de Gaulle – now leader of the Résistance against the Germans and their collaborators – had formed a provisional government in Paris. But none of this seemed to faze the "French of Sigmaringen": the head of the government Fernand de Brinon insisted that their goal was to liberate France from De Gaulle and the Americans. Who were these men (for there were only men) surrounding Pétain and Brinon? They were the most fanatical and radical partisans of the Collaboration, sworn enemies of the Republic and of democracy, guilty of having participated in the persecution, deportation and assassination of numerous Jewish people living in France. Former Prime minister Pierre Laval notably comes to mind.

Vague memories

Many of these men were subsequently judged and convicted by the French justice system, while others were able to escape by fleeing or disappearing into secrecy.

Philippe Pétain was the last to leave the premises on 22 April, heading for the Swiss border as the French flag was taken down; barely 24 hours later, the flag was raised again at the top of the castle, this time by the troops of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, allied with the Americans.

It may have been because of this continuity that the residents of Sigmaringen were unable to tell the French who had collaborated with the Nazis apart from the others, who had fought on the side of the Allies. Even though the collaborationists had spent seven months in Sigmaringen, the locals would barely remember them after the war.

It would be the same on the other side of the Rhine. Let us also remember that the French collaboration with the Nazis went largely unmentioned for decades. For the French,

Sigmaringen was at most an isolated town – "deep in the Black Forest", as was often and incorrectly said – where a strange chapter of Franco-German history took place. In his novel *D'un château l'autre* ("Castle to Castle"), published twelve years after the war, the writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who also spent the winter of 1944-1945 in Sigmaringen, reinforces this idea, but his descriptions have little to do with reality.

Sigmaringen – a Franco-German place of memory

Until recently, there was almost nothing at Sigmaringen to remind us of this period, save for anti-De Gaulle graffiti in the castle. To prevent this sad chapter of Franco-German history from falling into oblivion, a memory walk was created in 2019: not as a means of visiting Sigmaringen, but of preparing oneself for it. Much like Vichy, Sigmaringen can be considered a place of Franco-German memory, part of a painful but important chapter of our shared history.

Further reading

Becker, Otto H., « Frankreich in Sigmaringen: Wie die hohenzollerische Hauptstadt kurz vor dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges zum Sitz der französischen Kollaborationsregierung aus Vichy wurde », in : *Momente. Beiträge zur Landeskunde von Baden-Württemberg* 2 (2020), p. 8–11.

Brissaud, André, *Pétain à Sigmaringen 1944-1945*, Paris, 1966.

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Rouso, Henry, *Pétain et la fin de la Collaboration. Sigmaringen (1944-1945)*, Bruxelles, 1984.

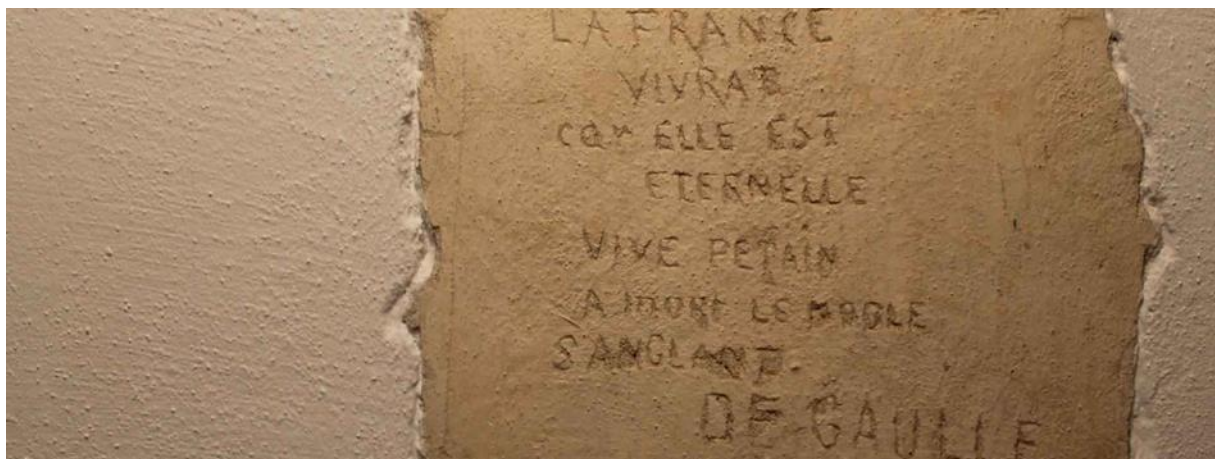
Auszug aus dem Roman D'un château l'autre von Louis-Ferdinand Céline (Paris 1957)

« ... vous comprenez tout le Moyen Age si vous avez un peu vécu à Sigmaringen... l'envie, toute la haine des vilains, tout autour, crevant de toutes les pourritures, famines, froids, fièvres {...}. D'abord une distribution de pain !... oh ! mais formidable !... À tous les réfugiés du bourg [...] En attendant les brioches, ils s'échangeaient puces, poux, morpions, gales [...] ils étaient en sorte de demi-cercle devant le pont-levis... roulaient de ces calots ! fascinés... de ce qui allait sortir comme bombance « Saligauds ! profiteurs ! bouffis ! traîtres ! Du pain là-dedans !... brang ! et vrang ! Au poteau Laval ! charogne ! salopard ! du pain !... merde !... Brinon !... fumier !... du pain !... » la colère monte !... ils étaient au moins trois cents à hurler au pain ! escalader passer la douve...

[...] les sirènes finissaient pas... mais la R.A.F. cherchait le pont... juste le pont ! au moment précis !... pas du mirage !... ils lâchaient tous leurs chapelets de bombes au-dessus du pont, à pic ! tout à trac !... trois quatre avions à la fois... comment ils faisaient pour le louper?... leurs chapelets de bombes faisaient geysers ! le Danube en bouillait ! et de ces éclaboussements de vase !... et dans les labours ... trois... quatre kilomètres dans les champs !... nous on était pressés sous l'arche, agglomérés contre l'énorme pilier de granit... c'était l'occasion de pisser, tous les ministres, et les Partis, et le Maréchal... »

Graffiti eines Petainisten in einem (meist geschlossenen) Gang im Schloss Sigmaringen

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« La France / vivra / car elle est / éternelle / Vive Pétain / à mort le drôle / sanglant / De Gaulle »

Céline

D'un château l'autre

