Journal of Transatlantic Studies (2021) 19:54–71
https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-020-00062-x

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'French airmen and the challenges of post-war order: francophone literary figures during the second world war'

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Accepted: 22 November 2020 / Published online: 12 February 2021

Abstract

This paper will examine the political thought of a selection of literary figures who fought in the Free French air forces during the Second World War: Romain Gary, Joseph Kessel and Antoine de St Exupery, all of whom fought under the Free French colours in the Royal Air Force. I intend to show how the literary output of these writers all, in their different ways, reflected the feelings of humiliation felt by the French in exile about the defeat of 1940, and how they suggested ways for France to recover in the post-war era. Their thinking about French domestic politics, their Allies (especially the British) and the future of Europe are all dominant themes. The writings of all of these personalities also reflect a strong belief in a future European détente in which the British and Americans have a lesser role than the one they often envisaged for themselves in the Washington-based 'post-war planning' process.

Keywords France · 1940-45 · Resistance · Gary · Kessel · St-Exupéry

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Introduction: why French Airmen are of interest

This article will look at a relatively unexplored area of the contribution made by French literary figures to the evolution of ideas of nation and war during the Second World War. All of them had an impact across the Atlantic, either being based there as exiles during at least part of the war, or in terms of the impact of their writings. In particular I will examine the thinking of Romain Gary,[1] Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,[2] and Joseph Kessel,[3] with a less concentrated examination of André Malraux.[4] All of these were seminal writers, Gary after the war, St-Exupéry and Kessel both before and after 1939; all were recipients of major prizes (Gary even managed to win the Goncourt twice) and; all are still popular and in print to the present day. Rather surprisingly, all of them flew as combatant airmen in the Free French forces during the Second World War, St-Exupéry being killed in action on 31 July 1944. Malraux is a slight exception in that he was mainly known at this period as a war reporter who wrote with great verve about the role of airmen in the Spanish Civil War and as a famous novelist, though he spent most of the war in the French Resistance.

The interest of these figures for this issue of the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* lies in their intimate linking of the ways they saw the future of France as a national entity and as part of a possible new international order after the war. The two themes were constants in their writing and public actions. All of them also had a particular

[1] Gary was born in Vilnius, then in Poland, now in Lithuania; Kessel was Russian, though he was born in Argentina to Lithuanian parents). Both were naturalised French citizens, and both served in the French air force within the RAF during the war. Gary's life in Vilnius and Nice before the war was described by Romain Gary, in *La promesse de l'aube* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). Gary's post-war works also include: *Les racines du ciel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), and; *La vie devant soi* (under the pseudonym of Emil Ajar), (Paris: Gallimard, 1982). Both of these latter books received the prestigious *Prix Goncourt.*

[2] Hereafter 'St-Exupéry', though 'Saint-Ex' was the acronym favoured by Raymond Aron: Antoine de St-Exupéry, *Ecrits de Guerre, 1939–1944,* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), *Préface* by Raymond Aron, 12. I have used this edition. In English: *Wartime Writings, 1939–1944*, (New York: Harcourt, 1986). I will also use his: *Pilote de Guerre: Mission sur* Arras (New York: Editions de la Maison Française, 1942 and Paris: Gallimard, 1972). For biographies see: Dominique Lablanche, Stacy de La Bruyère, Françoise Bouillot, *Saint-Exupéry: Une vie à contre-courant* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994); In English: Stacy Schiff, *Saint-Exupéry: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); Paul Webster, *Antoine de St-Exupéry: The Life and Death of the Little Prince* (London: Pan Macmillan, 1993). On Aron (in English) see; Olivier Schmitt (ed.) *Raymond Aron and International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

[3] On Kessel, see: Yves Courrière, *Joseph Kessel, ou Sur la piste du lion* (Paris: Plon, 1985). He was the author after 1918 of about 85 books, many of them autobiographical and often about Russia and central Asia, where his most famous book *Les Cavaliers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967) is set. He also inspired a number of films, including *Belle de Jour*, (1967, directed by Luis Bunuel) which starred Catherine Deneuve, and which was based on a novel by Kessel, as was *The Horsemen* (1971, directed by John Frankenheimer).

[4] André Malraux was a major literary and cultural figure in France and beyond, whose most famous book is (probably) *La condition humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933), an account of the massacres in Shanghai of Chinese Communists by Nationalists in 1927, which Malraux witnessed. Close to Charles de Gaulle after the war, he served as de Gaulle's ambassador to Beijing in the 1960s and as a cultural ambassador in the USA and elsewhere: Odile Rudelle, 'Malraux et de Gaulle', *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire*, No 14, April–June 1987, 103-4 is a very short overview; a fuller treatment is: Herman Lebovics, 'André Malraux: A Hero for France's Unheroic Age', *French Politics and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 'La France à la recherche de ses universités' (Winter 1997), 58–69.

interest in who should lead France during the war and after it. All of them had visions of a cosmopolitan order and often of one that was essentially European. And all of them shared the interest of seeing a world in creation from '10,000 metres' in the air while flying a flimsy airplane, as St-Exupéry put it.[5] The context in which they saw their visions was one dominated by war and by the much less visible planning of the new world order after 1945. As I have shown elsewhere, French input into what was known as 'Post-War Planning' was patchy at best. Insofar as there were major inputs from French thinkers in exile into the process they tended to be channelled in private conversations with prominent British and American politicians and policy makers, a process that has been described elsewhere, including by me.[6]

European input into the Post-War Planning process was quite considerable, especially through the Council on Foreign Relations, which took extensive soundings from European governments in exile. As they were occupied by the Germans, they were particularly asked about the future of Germany. The Dutch Government led by Prince Bernhard was given particular access and warmly received by Roosevelt, and in that case urged a non-retributive peace on the Allies. The Dutch put particular emphasis on avoiding the worst excesses of the Treaty of Versailles. In addition, some of Roosevelt's closest advisors, in this case William Bullitt, believed, well before victory in early 1943, that the creation of a 'Europe, integrated and democratic…[was]…an essential element for the construction of durable peace'. The failure of the Treaty of Versailles, which Bullitt had seen up close as a young staffer in Paris, proved to him that the 'Treaty was the dog and the League of Nations was the tail, and the tail would not wag the dog.' The 'tail' now had to be 'an integrated, democratic Europe strong enough to defend itself against the Soviet Union, with the aid of Great Britain, and more remotely the USA.' He did not mention France once in the entire 23 pages of the memo or in a subsequent one of May 1943.[7]

The weight of Europe, as opposed to the potential weight of a much larger global role for the international organisations and the major Allies, was a subject for often fraught discussion. It was a process largely delegated to Sumner Welles, Under-Secretary of State after August 1941. As Christopher O'Sullivan rightly notes, Welles and Harley Notter, the author of the definitive insider account of Post-War Planning, wanted to avoid the problems associated with the First World War's 'Inquiry'. Then, one man, Colonel House, had managed to dominate Wilson's thinking, with disastrous results.[8] It was fully realised that the USA would have its own national interest

[5] St-Exupéry, *Ecrits de Guerre*, 'lettre à X', December 1939, 43.

[6] Andrew Williams, "France and the Origins of the United Nations, 1944–1945: "Si La France ne compte plus, qu'on nous le dise"', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, June 2017. See also: Andrew Williams, *France, Britain and the United States, 1940–1961: A Reappraisal* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[7] Bullitt to FDR, 29 January 1943 and 12 May 1943, FDR PSF Secretary's Files, Box 24, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library (hereafter FDR Library).

[8] Andrew Williams, *Failed Imagination: The Anglo-American New World Order from Wilson to Bush* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 2007), chap. 3, 90-92. For an excellent overview of American plans see: David Mayers, *America and the Postwar World: Remaking International Society, 1945–1956* (London: Routledge, 2018). On Welles see: Christopher O'Sullivan, *Sumner Welles, Post-War Planning, and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), and; Simon Rofe, *Franklin Roosevelt's Foreign Policy and the Welles' Mission* (London: Palgrave, 2007). The official history

as a guiding principle, and not 'the purely political problems' of the European states, including Britain and France. But it was also realised, in the words of State Department staffer Hugh R. Wilson that a 'world order' would this time round require the USA to help Europe with its 'reconstruction', which it had not in 1919.[9]

The French in exile were often at odds with de Gaulle's 'France combattante'. The main chronicler of the French exiles in New York, Emmanuelle Loyer, points out that 'exile' was not considered by the majority of the French population, and even more so by the French Resistance, as being 'resistance' at all, unless the exile in question went with de Gaulle to London and fought for the Free French in some capacity or represented de Gaulle abroad.[10]

Prominent French political figures like Jean Monnet and Maurice Schuman in exile naturally played a role in highlighting issues of international politics, but they often had to agree with de Gaulle to be listened to and the problem with that was de Gaulle was poorly seen by the American Administration. Unlike in their dealings with the Dutch Government, for example, the eternal question for Roosevelt and Welles was 'which France' needed to be recognised, exacerbated by infighting among French exiles in the USA about who should represent the Free French. This led the American administration to be initially cool at best and on occasion hostile to Free French representatives. The French community in the USA in 1941–1942 was made up of many different factions, some of them openly sympathetic to Vichy, and by no means all of those who opposed Vichy supported de Gaulle. The analogous problem for Roosevelt was that many, but by no means all, of the key French political figures 'rallied' to de Gaulle and some of them were distrusted by de Gaulle or distrusted him.[11]

The writers of fiction that we have highlighted here were important not only as key intellectuals but also as commentators who articulated the hopes and fears of a generation of French people in a quite different way, through novels and first-hand accounts of warfare. Monnet played a role far behind the scenes, these writers were (and are) listened to by a far wider audience. Some of them were also very influential among French exiles in France and in London and New York. This was particularly true in St-Exupéry's case, who has been described as one of the '*deux consciences des Français de l'extérieur*' ['the two main spokesmen for the French in exile']; the other was the Catholic intellectual Jacques Maritain, with whom St Exupéry disagreed on many issues, notably the importance of de Gaulle. These were public intellectuals of great importance and it can be argued that their thinking has marked public discourse far more than many a forgotten politician. They did not just

Footnote 8 (continued)
of Post-War Planning is: Harley Notter, *Post-War Foreign Policy Preparation, 1939–1945*, (Washington: US Department of State, 1949).

[9] Hugh R. Wilson, 'Memorandum on World Order', 22 January 1940, Berle Papers, Box 54, FDR Library.

[10] Emmanuelle Loyer, *Paris à New York: Intellectuels et artistes français en exil, 1940–1947* (Paris: Grasset, 2005), chap. 1.

[11] For more on this see Williams, *France, Britain and the United States, Vol 2: 1940–1961*, chap. 2, 119-120.

talk about a new world, liberation and resistance, they acted it out and a significant part of their influence resides in that moral and physical commitment.

Modernity and flight

We might even term the visions of our airmen as 'applied modernity', such was the importance of air flight to the modernist movement that emerged before, during and after the First World War. This was most clearly demonstrated by the Italian 'futurists', led by Filippo Marinetti, who started their 'Manifesto' of 1909 with the declaration: 'We want to celebrate the love of danger, the habits of energy and fearlessness', all emblematic of the very recent pioneers of the air.[12] The machine-like warfare of the trenches seemed to many to confirm the arrival of a war that claimed to defend 'civilisation' but threatened to kill it. Emilio Gentile sees this as the worm in the heart of *La Belle Epoque*, nurtured by the collapse of bourgeois democracy and empire.[13] One of the undoubted attractions of aerial warfare was ironically that it was the *least* modern of the different methods of killing people in 1914–1918, as the 'aces' were among the very few to regularly engage in one-on-one combat, usually to the death. They were latter day knights, a feature lauded by D'Annunzio. Flying in general and air warfare had long dominated the discussion about modernity. France, the land of troubadours and knights *par excellence*, had had a particular love affair with flight since at least the Montgolfier Brothers early experiments with balloons in the late eighteenth Century. In the early days of aircraft Louis Bleriot was the first pioneer to cross the English Channel [*La Manche*] in 1909. During the First World War France had fighter aces on a par with German pilots such as Manfred von Richthofen (kia 1918), British pilots like Albert Ball (kia 1917) and Edward Mannock (kia 1918), the most celebrated being Roland Garros (kia 1918) and Georges Guynemer (kia 1917).

The war was followed by the failed peace of Versailles and then by a new series of atrocious modern wars in China, Abyssinia and Spain. This latter war can be seen as having been a dry run for the even worse horrors of the Second World War, both in its barbarity towards civilians and in its technological innovations, especially with the coming of age of armoured and aerial warfare. The literary and cultural result was usually one of despair. But it could be one of guarded hope. Malraux, who had witnessed some of the horrors of the developing Chinese Civil War and given them literary immortality in *La Condition Humaine* [*Man's Estate*], was also present in the first campaigns of the Spanish Civil War, as a journalist in Toledo where he observed the 1936–1937 Battle of Teruel, later (1945) made into a film. Most interesting for our purposes was his commentary about the Franquist and Republican air forces.[14] Most telling was the emphasis put by Malraux on the internationalisation

[12] Emilio Gentile, *L'Apocalypse de la modernité* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011), 55.

[13] Gentile, *L'Apocalypse de la modernité*, *ibid.*

[14] André Malraux, *l'espoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937)—English version: *Man's Hope* (New York: Modern Library, 1941); the film was called *Espoir: Sierra de Teruel*, in black and white, not released in France until 1945.

of the struggle against Franco and the condemnation of the brutality of fascism as against the self-sacrifice of the democratic republicans. This was a feature of Malraux's later reverence (the word is not too strong) for de Gaulle.[15]

Methodology

This exclusion from 'normal' political processes is one way to explain why the use of the literary source thus becomes ineluctable, as it does with any society that is so excluded, internally or externally. We can therefore build on Frank Costigliola's 'cultural' approach to thinking about France's engagement with the international by using sources often seen as 'fictional'.[16] Who speaks of France speaks of literature. The political discourse of France, and arguably of many other countries that have had a very troubled relationship with 'normal' (so Anglo-Saxon?) parliamentary democracy, such as Russia and Germany, have thought through their political dilemmas through literature. Many great historians have realised the importance of literature as a source for understanding historical realities. In *The Idea of History*, written during the war and published in 1946, R.G. Collingwood even suggested that '[a] work of literature can also be regarded as a source of historical information and often clarifies the climate of thought of a particular age better than any other document.'[17] The very expression 'climate of thought' immediately evokes the great *Annales* idea of the importance of understanding the *mentalité*, or the psychological climate of a period. Though later superseded by other French thinking about literature, culture and society, the *Annales* School reigned supreme in French history faculties at least until the 1980s. One way of explaining how this can be operationalised may be through the insights of another prominent aesthetic philosopher of the same period, Georg Lukacs, who was very influential in French intellectual circles in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Hungarian Marxist literary theorist is best known as the author of *The Theory of the Novel (*1916), *History and Class Consciousness* (1920) and *The Historical Novel* (1955), though this latter book was mainly written in 1936–1937. Lukacs saw the novel as the pre-eminent way to express ideas, and especially revolutionary ideas. He found the 'historical' writings of Walter Scott and Honoré de Balzac as best expressing the 'realist' yearnings of society for change and sought to find their equivalents in a new period of social and cultural upheaval as severe as that of the

[15] For an overview of de Gaulle in the 1960s see: Garret Joseph Martin, *General de Gaulle's Cold War: Challenging American Hegemony, 1963–1968* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013). See also: Carolyne Davidson, "Dealing with de Gaulle: The United States and France", in Christian Nuenlist, Anna Locher and Garret Martin (eds), *Globalizing de Gaulle: International Perspectives on French Foreign Policies, 1958–1969* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 112.

[16] Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance, 1940*–1990 (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

[17] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 20.

early nineteenth century.[18] As Lukacs put it, the 'great' historical novels, starting with Scott, portray 'the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarities of their age'. They illustrate 'nodal points' in the evolution of the material and of ideology. Lukacs was himself 'typical' (his favourite word to explain the truly authentic) and was both greatly influenced and had a great influence by and on French (and German) cultural and political life. This ranged from absorbing the syndicalist thinking of Georges Sorel and the philosophy of Henri Bergson to helping the thinking of prominent Second World War post-war intellectuals like Theodor Adorno and Georg Lichtheim.[19] These great post-war thinkers, whether they be 'Marxist' or of some other ideological persuasion, were in many ways the true original 'Europeans', all scarred by their experiences of war. Lichtheim's analysis of totalitarianism, 'the forcible reconstruction of the social order by a single-party regime in effective control of the political superstructure',[20] required a war to make a fundamental change of course happen, a fragile victory it may seem in 2018.

I have thus attempted to select a few of the key writers in what might be called a 'realist' literary tradition, in Lukacs's sense of the term, in that they created works of 'typical nodal points in the development of the historical novel'. Lichtheim's definition of totalitarianism could be interpreted as a description of what St Exupéry, and many other French feared was de Gaulle's aim for France. How should the intellectual elites respond when the state risked capture by charismatic individuals?[21] It is still a valid question today.

International and National Politics in the French literary imagination before 1939

Engagement

We need first to understand the complex and rich literary and cultural background against which internationalists like Gary, Kessel and St-Exupéry were writing. The young generation of Francophone writers that either fought in the Second World War, like Gary or St-Exupéry, or were close observers of it, were not in a sense 'typical' writers of their time. Many prominent French writers were nationalists who nonetheless put themselves on the side of 'collaboration', often on the Right of French politics, and allied themselves to Nazi Germany in a more or less enthusiastic

[18] Gyorgy (Georg) Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (London: Merlin, 1971b) (1916); *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1971a) (1920) and; *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin, 1962) (1955), 10-15.

[19] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (New York: Peter Smith, 1915) (first published in French in 1906). On Georg Lichtheim see in particular: *A Short History of Socialism* (London: Weidenfeld, 1970), and; *Thoughts Among the Ruins: Collected essays on Europe and beyond* (London: Weidenfeld, 1973).

[20] Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, 13.

[21] Lichtheim, *Short History of Socialism*, 305.

way, like Pierre Drieu la Rochelle and Louis Ferdinand Céline.[22] In other words they saw their future as part of an 'internationalist' German empire, with a subordinate France. There is a strong, though not absolute direct correlation between those who 'collaborated' and those who were 'anti-Dreyfusards' before 1910, especially the thinkers and activists who made up the nationalist party *Action Française*, led by Charles Maurras, who was tried as a collaborator after Liberation. He told the judge that it was 'the revenge of Dreyfus'. Most of them started from a perception of France that had 'failed' but came up with different solutions to that failure.

And (usually) those that collaborated were of the 'generation of 1914', tortured by memories of the First World War.[23] Those who resisted were equally in revolt against the 'decadence' of France. Kessel fought in the First World War as a fighter pilot, and even volunteered in 1918 to fight for France against the Germans in Russia, a devotion to the cause that even his fellow airmen thought excessive. His exploits, written up in a later semi-autobiographical book, *Les Temps Sauvages*, is an account of his observations in Siberia, as well as the account of a love affair at the age of 20.[24] Like Gary, Kessel was a devoted French patriot, despite being from a family of refugees from anti-semitism in Russia (though born in Argentina where his family just happened to be at the time). Like more than two million others of the period who fled the pogroms of the Czar, Kessel embraced his new homeland with a fierce affection as '*le petit Juif russe adopté par la France*' [a mere Russian Jew adopted by France] not least because France was for both him and Gary the symbol of internationalist democracy, even if that dream was shattered during the Vichy regime of Philippe Pétain.[25]

But other voices in France drew different conclusions about French ambitions to spread the word of France's emancipatory purpose after 1919, especially in the Third Republic's hopes for a new international order based on the League of Nations. That dream foundered on the refusal of the USA to adhere to the League and well publicised disagreements with Britain, France's other ally of the war, dual developments which have often been seen as disabling the entire internationalist project. Before 1939 Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu, founders of '*Ordre nouveau*' [New Order], a loose coalition of cantankerous young intellectuals of the right and left of French politics, called for an end to parliamentary democracy, a return to 'revolutionary' principles and a rejection of American capitalism, as well as harbouring a dismissive attitude to the League of Nations.[26] On the whole they had

[22] Notably: Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *La Comedie de Charleroi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934), and *Socialisme fasciste,* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934); Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Paris: Editions Denöel, 1932).

[23] Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1980). This term refers to those who fought in the Great War.

[24] Joseph Kessel, *Les Temps Sauvages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). It might be noted that by the time he arrived in Russia in 1919 the war was over, but his observations of the Vladivostok area are remarkable. Most of his time getting there, in place, and returning to France was spent under the influence of alcohol.

[25] Courrière, *Joseph Kessel*, 92.

[26] Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu, *Décadence de la nation française* (Paris: Editions Rieder, 1931) and; *La revolution nécessaire* (Paris: Editions Rieder, 1933).

not fought in, or over, the trenches, though they were dismissive of the world order created after 1918. Other writers like the future Vichy collaborationists Céline and Drieu had fought in the front line, but held similar views. More non-conformist than anything else, they were part of a youth in revolt against the idiocies of bourgeois Europe that also published in *Esprit*, *La nouvelle revue Française* and other journals, and had an immense impact on French intellectual life before the war. Gary and Kessel took a different line, partly because as Jewish Frenchmen they abhorred the anti-Semitic policies of both the Nazis and Vichy, ones which Céline and Drieu embraced whole-heartedly, but also because they were natural French patriots.

Aviateurs et politique

As discussed above, the author of the *Little Prince*, St-Exupéry, as well as Gary and Kessel, were aviators, all three fighting in Free French aerial formations throughout the war, with St-Exupéry being killed in action in 1944.[27] Gary and Kessel both flew with the Free French 'Lorraine' 342 bomber squadron of the Royal Air Force. Together the three make up a substantial corpus of post-war literature that had a wide influence, certainly artistic and intellectual and sometimes overtly political. One reason for that is precisely their status as *résistants*, which gave them a popular status similar to the (possibly) higher status of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, though Sartre's *bona fides* as a *résistant* are less well founded.

Their self-proclaimed remit was different however. While Sartre and Camus spoke largely to an international politics outside Europe, these pilot – thinkers were imagineers of Europe itself. Gary, Kessel and St-Exupéry published books (see below for more exegesis) on their wartime experiences in 1945; Kessel and St-Exupéry were already well known as writers and journalists, Gary a complete unknown, but all were writing novels at a moment of a great need for a heroic French narrative.

Romain Gary

Gary was a pilot-instructor during the war, and an early *résistant* who went to join de Gaulle in London in 1940. He was to become one of post-war France's most celebrated novelists, as well as having a short but interesting diplomatic career, part of which took him to Los Angeles. Gary's autobiography, *La promesse de l'aube* [*Promise at Dawn*], a great deal of which describes his experiences during the war, is simultaneously amusing, depressing and illuminating about his struggle with what he calls the three 'Gods' of 'stupidity' (*la bêtise*), 'the absolute truth' [*les vérités absolues*] and 'small mindedness', [*petitesse*], within which he included 'prejudice, disdain, hate'.[28]

[27] Antoine de St-Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939) [In French: *Terre des Hommes* 1939], and; *Le petit prince* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007) [first published 1943].

[28] Gary, *La promesse de l'aube*, 18-19. Here quotes are from the 1980 'definitive' edition. The English edition is: *Promise at Dawn* (London: Penguin, 2018).

Intellectually that led him, and his many followers, to reflect on the reality that these equivalents of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse had led to devastating war. In particular he hated racism 'a marvellous organiser of mass movements, wars, lynch parties, persecutions, [an] able dialectician, the father of all ideological formations, great Inquisitor and lover of holy wars, in spite of his mangy skin, his hyena head and his mangled feet still the most powerful and listened to … [of our planet….]' Gary's primal scream, for as such it comes across in spite of his humour and delicate touch, is so moving because he was himself the victim of that particular God. But he also hated with a venom that cannot help but shock the other two 'Gods', and here of course his blows come at the expense of a much wider group than Nazis, whom he subsumes as a 'cossack standing on a pile of corpses… [with] one half of humanity licking his boots….' and their ilk. His most important blows land on the intelligentsia (with their heads so 'full of the love of abstraction'), the rich and powerful hypocrites who lend themselves to persuading the masses that horrors such as the atomic bomb are acceptable. Gary can be seen as the anti-Céline, in his love of humanity, linked with his despair for it.[29]

During the war he wrote his first novel, considered one of his best, *Education européenne* [A European Education]. The plot centres round a group of partisans who are engaged in brutal combat with one of the SS's most feared and hated divisions, *Das Reich,* in the forests of the Ukraine. In 1944 the soldiers of *Das Reich* were known in France as the perpetrators of some of the worst Nazi massacres on French soil at Tulle and Oradour sur Glane. However, this was a skill they had perfected in the Ukraine. Ironically many of the division were *Alsaciens*, Frenchmen who fought willingly or as conscripts for the SS. Gary's Ukrainian partisans hold different views on Germans, Russians and the difficulties of life and death, but they all agree that after the war Europe must change.

In a key exchange between Tadek Chmura, the doomed Polish poet partisan and the hero of the book, Janek Twardowski, Tadek enumerates all the reasons for despair. But he says humankind needs a 'refuge… sometimes only a song, a poem, music, a book', but never 'despair… which [shows] only a lack of talent'. The talent needed is to re-imagine the future through art. So while they are in their current hellish situation the experience is a 'European education', a lesson in why the notions of 'liberty, human dignity and fraternity' have made Europe what it is, or was. '*C'est l'heure des ténèbres… Elle passera*' [This is the time of darkness… it will pass]. One of the partisans, who becomes Janek's closest friend, Adam Dobranski, relates their mission of self-discovery by writing a novel (within the novel) with the same title as Gary's book, most of it based on a series of mythical tales of great power and savage humour. After a long and often painful personal journey Janek is the partisan that survives and cradles his dying comrade Adam as he promises to finally finish his book for him. He doesn't of course but Gary's most famous line sums up why: '*Le patriotisme, c'est l'amour des siens. Le nationalisme, c'est la haine des autres*.' [Patriotism is the love of your own people. Nationalism is the hatred of others]. But

[29] Gary, *La promesse de l'aube*, *ibid*. This book was made into a film in 2017 by Eric Barbier. See also: Laurent Seksik, *Romain Gary s'en va-t-en guerre* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017).

what is often forgotten are the next words: '*Les Russes, les Américains, tout ça… Il y a une grande fraternité qui se prepare au monde, les Allemands nous auront valu au moins ça*.' [These Russians and Americans, all that… they are creating a great fraternity on Earth, the Germans can at least claim some credit for that]. This is a book that was an important harbinger of a future united Europe, but also of an emerging world order, even if not exactly the one Gary envisaged in 1945.[30]

Antoine de St-Exupéry

St-Exupéry was much older during the war, a celebrity pilot-author, a French version of Charles Lindbergh. He has left a substantial volume of wartime writings in the form of letters, political tracts and '*brouillons*' (unpublished drafts), with the most famous published piece being the autobiographical 'Flight over Arras [*Vol sur Arras*]', often referred to as *Pilote de Guerre*. This book is the most explicitly written of all the books considered here for an audience that liked to read about flying. St-Exupéry talks at length about the technical aspects of being a pilot and the problems of flying a slow observation aircraft against the much more rapid and manoeuvrable fighter planes of the *Luftwaffe*. He is told by his Commandant that his 'mission' to Arras, to observe German troop and tank movements is essentially doomed to failure as the Germans have total control of the air, and indeed the ground beneath it. As he is told, the mission is rather '*embêtante*' (annoying) he realises that he is being sent on a '*mission sacrifiée*' (suicide mission)—the Commandant even suggests that he might be able to cancel it 'if you are not feeling well….' St-Exupéry refuses such a suggestion as unworthy ('*Voyons, mon Commandant!*'), even when the news is added that no less than six Messerschmitt ME109 fighters might meet him on the way to Arras (suitably flying at different heights) and takes off. His crew are not enthusiastic but off they go. And even though the six German planes see them, by some miracle they do not attack and the French crew are able to make it back to their base.[31]

But it is also a book about politics, and in particular about the fight for civilisation during and after the war. In *Pilote de Guerre*, St-Exupéry claims that he does not think about the 'fight of the West against Nazism' [*la lutte de l'Occident contre le nazisme*]. I think about the details of survival [*Je pense details immédiats*]. Later in he admits that 'the fight of the West against Nazism is in fact a question of controls, levers and taps [*le combat de l'Occident et le Nazism… deviant… une action sur des manettes, des leviers et des robinets*]'. It is through the mechanism of flying that he is fighting an ideological battle. He goes on to elaborate that he has often been told repeatedly that 'France always finds a solution when all seems lost [*En France, quand tout semble perdu, un miracle sauve la France*]', but now he does not believe it.[32] But once he was in exile he became more politically committed.

30 Romain Gary, *Education européene* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956) [first published 1945], 76–77, 89 and 246.

31 St-Exupéry, *Pilote de Guerre*, 15-18, 25-30.

32 St-Exupéry, *Pilote de Guerre*, 25, 39 and 77.

This can be seen in St-Exupéry's later wartime *oeuvre*, a curious, rambling, at times uplifting, semi-autobiographical essay entitled *Citadelle*. He started writing this in 1936 and worked on it periodically throughout the war, so there is no 'plot', it is not a novel in the normal sense of the word. A rumination on life, death and God, which he on occasion called his 'posthumous book', it was condemned at the time of its (posthumous) publication as being too 'biblical'. He had never edited what was a series of drafts before volunteering for more action in March 1943. He was shot down and killed over Marseilles before he could re-write it in a more digestible form. Ironically he benefitted before 1940 from critiques of the growing manuscript from his then friend the Nazi collaborator Drieu la Rochelle (mentioned above), with whom he shared a disavowal of 'all materialist systems [*tout système qui aurait le bien-être materiel comme seule fin*]'.[33] In that important sense he was as much a member of the 'Generation of 1914' as many of the collaborators, and indeed de Gaulle himself. All of these thinkers had a great respect for Germany, and saw the possibility, maybe even the necessity, of a better cooperation between Germany and France. Though their paths diverged after 1940 they all lived and died for this idea.[34]

After 1940 St-Exupéry also shared with his friend Raymond Aron a suspicion of de Gaulle's intentions as a leader of France, and that has tended to define him politically in the last period of his life, which ended in July 1944 over Marseilles. Aron portrays this 'crisis of conscience' as a positive contribution, but Jacques Maritain, whom we have heard described above by Aron as '[one of] the *deux consciences des Français de l'extérieur*' along with St Exupéry, condemned the latter for daring to suggest a 'union' in 1942 with the USA, an idea which Maritain considered another '*abandon tragique dont l'expression décisive a été l'armistice de 1940*.' [tragic betrayal, of which the clearest expression was the Armistice of 1940]. Of course Maritain must also have been aware that an *Anglo*-French union had been discussed in the last days before the Armistice (with de Gaulle himself representing then French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud at the talks in London).[35] This was a union St-Exupéry would also have agreed with—'*L'Angleterre, c'est notre conscience*' [Britain is our conscience]—and without which France would not still be at war. Maritain portrayed any obeisance to the 'Anglo-Saxons' as a betrayal of France, and this while benefitting from US protection in New York. Aron had much more sympathy for St Exupéry, who was '*désesperé*' by such sentiments, than for Maritain. Maritain's defence was that Aron 'thought politically, St Exupéry wanted to ignore it' [*pensait à la politique, St-Exupéry … voulait ignorer la politique*'],[36] but of course it depends on which 'politique' we want to emphasise, that of a cosmopolitan inter-Allied version (like Aron and St-Exupéry) or a French nationalist version (like Maritain). It was not St-Exupéry's only foray into appealing to the

[33] Antoine de St-Exupéry, *Citadelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 7–8; *Ecrits de Guerre, 1939–1944*, *op.cit.*

[34] Andrew Williams, 'Charles De Gaulle: The Warrior as Statesman' *Global Society: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations*, Vol 32, Issue 2, April 2018,162-175.

[35] See: Jean Monnet, *Mémoires* (Paris: Fayard, 1976), 14-24. See also Williams, *France, Britain and the United States, 1940–1961*, 139-140.

[36] Aron, quoting Maritain, in: St-Exupéry, *Ecrits de Guerre, 1939–1944*, 11 - 13. On England, 49: 'lettre à X', end December 1939.

USA for help. His most significant, but apparently unpublished, appeal was in June 1940 when he was fighting with his squadron to hold back the German tide around Arras, in which he wrote to American isolationist airman Charles Lindbergh and his wife Anne Morrow Lindbergh begging them to change their minds about the USA remaining out of the war.[37]

St-Exupéry, in wishing to 'ignore politics' was in fact searching for a new way to formulate politics. Where had the 'drug' of nationalist love led except to disaster? As he commented when his doctor friend Pierre Lazareff was being positive about the effect Chamberlain had had on Hitler at Munich in late September 1938, '*c'était bien prévisible. Tu mets en presence l'un et l'autre, Attila et Bergson. Pas de doute qu'Attila ne stupéfie Bergson. Quant à Bergson, il ne saurait produire aucun effet sur Attila…*' [It was totally predictable: You put them together, Attila and Bergson. There is no doubt that Attila will enthrall Bergson. But Bergson will not have the slightest effect on Attila.]'[38] Hitler had 'enthralled' the German population, now he was doing it to everyone else. And in this quest said St-Exupéry, Hitler was a man of 'good faith' [*bon foi*], as Attila might be said to have been when he confronted the dazzled Chamberlain/Bergson. The world must note that Nazi Germany was not the Germany of 'Goethe or Bach'—this was a Germany intent on 'expansion… *Cette tendance qui fait partie de toutes les espèces animales. Chaque race tend a pulluler et à exterminer les autres*….'[a tendency that is a feature of all animal species. Each race has a tendency to proliferate and destroy all the others].[39] Had he lived his voice might well have proved a moderating force of the voices in France calling for revenge, but his words can be read in different ways. De Gaulle ensured that his books were banned in Algiers during the war, but that was due to St-Exupéry's obstinate refusal to endorse him as undisputed leader of France.

Joseph Kessel

As was discussed above, Kessel had spent some of the First World War in a squadron on the Western Front as both observer and pilot, where he had a reputation for skill and bravery. In 1939 he volunteered for the French armed forces and saw first hand the disarray of the High Command and its lack of preparation for combat. On one occasion he (illegally) managed to persuade a former French flying wartime companion from 1917 to fly him over German lines and published his findings in *Paris-Soir* where he was still working as a journalist. This led the French General in charge of the armies of the East to thank him for the information contained in

[37] The contact with the Lindbergh is evoked in the documents 'Aux Américains' and 'Ecrire, mais avec son corps' ['writing with his own body'] where St-Exupéry pleads with Anne Morrow Lindbergh for American assistance for France, which she refers to in *The New York Tribune* of 7 June 1940: *Ecrits de Guerre*, 88-98. St-Exupéry was friendly with both Lindbergh and his wife, though they disagreed over whether Hitler was more of a danger to world peace than the Soviet Union. See also: Antoine de St- Exupéry website, entry on the Lindbergh, https://www.antoinedesaintexupery.com/personne/charles-et-anne-morrow-lindbergh/ (accessed, 25 January 2020).

[38] St-Exupéry, *Ecrits de Guerre*, '1939', 17.

[39] St-Exupéry, *Ecrits de Guerre,* radio broadcast of 18 October 1939, 25.

his article, which came as a surprise: 'Grâce à vous jai appris beaucoup de choses!' [Thanks to you I have learned a lot of things!] Kessel also witnessed the terrible defeats of the French armies as had St-Exupéry, being knocked off the road by a fleeing French vehicle as he attempted to get closer to the fighting. He also saw evidence that when French units did not run they could do real damage to the invading forces.[40] These experiences combined to make him choose the road of resistance rather than that of collaboration, de Gaulle over Pétain.

These existential and literal conflicts are illustrated amply in Kessel's *Les Maudru.* It has been described as 'le premier roman écrit à la gloire de la Résistance naissante' [the first novel to glorify the emerging Resistance].[41] This was published as a limited edition in 1945, mainly due to the paper shortage of that year in France, though the manuscript is dated 16 February 1941, so from a very early period of the war. It is the story of a French peasant family from the *Pas de Calais*, and traces that family's feelings about the first year of the war. The son, Désiré Maudru, is a pilot member of a bomber crew, much as Kessel was; as mentioned earlier, Kessel flew in the same squadron as Gary. The text reads like the film scripts at which Kessel excelled and has all the physical and erotic charge of his other work, like *Belle de jour*. Désiré's plane is shot down by German fighters over Bruges, presumably in the same battle of 1940 that St-Exupéry experienced over Arras on the other side of the French border. Meanwhile Tancrède, Maudru *père*, and his mother, Margot, try and get on with their lives in the *Pas de Calais* in spite of the war, Désiré initially feels 'en dehors de tout cela' ['distanced from all that'] even in the middle of the battle and seeing his crew killed. The Germans, the whole family has decided, are 'too strong', unlike the 'last time' and Tancrède has decided the war is over—why fight on for the 'beaux yeux des Anglais' [the blue eyes of the English], whom he so dislikes?[42]

It transpires that Margot had slept with a passing English boy ten years previously, and had never been allowed to fully forget her trespass, while the thought of it had continued to torture Tancrède. The English were literally in their heads and whenever they had cropped up in a conversation Tancrède had gone to the local bar and drunk far too much rum, not that he ever lost his temper or became violent, just morose. Now he had a son who was presumably a prisoner of the Germans and his drinking companion Pierre, who had lost a leg in 1914–1918, and several young men were talking about going over the Channel and joining the Free French. But in his Anglophobe bitterness Tancrède decided to collaborate by standing a round of drinks for two German motor bike troops who entered the bar.

All that changes in the story when two of the young men, Simon and François (nickname '*l'Innocent*'), discover Désiré Maudru hiding in a barn, while Tancrède is drinking with the German soldiers. Désiré has escaped German capture and made his way back to France where he now wants to fight on with the English. But one of the two naïve young men take him to the bar to see his father, now in the company of German soldiers, who immediately suspect something is unusual in the apparition of the

[40] Courrière, *Joseph Kessel*, 521.

[41] Courrière, *Joseph Kessel*, 549.

[42] Joseph Kessel, *Les Maudru.* (Paris: Julliard, 1945), 8, 17, 19.

down at heel Désiré. His father immediately whisks him home, where his son bursts into floods of tears for his massacred comrades, for he is no longer 'distanced from all that'.[43] He disliked the English as much as his father and liked only 'his pay, women, wine and newspapers', except when a Spitfire had removed a Messerschmitt from his plane's tail that had been about to shoot him down. Now he spends his spare time on the coast watching the German planes speeding towards England, while occasionally making love to the serving girl at the local inn on the same cliffs. On one such occasion, he discovers she is wearing a small swastika emblem, which ends their relationship.[44]

Then Désiré tells his father he has heard a French pilot talking from London on the radio. His father replies that if his son was to join the exiles, it 'would not be the first possession [*bien*] of mine they stole', a clear reference to Margot's fling, though it is a reference which Désiré does not understand. Désiré decides to flee to England taking as much information as he can to guide the English bombers, when he is told about the sinking of the French fleet in Mers El-Kébir, 'nothing less than that my friend' the barman tells him. It gets worse when he hears that his brother Jacquot's ship, the *Bretagne*, has been lost with all hands. His father tells him that if he is still of a mind to go to England, he will hand him over to the Germans or beat him to a pulp. The old soldier of the previous war, Pierre, laments the turn of events, for he had fought with the English and liked them, while Simon and François tell Desiré they have actually been persuaded to go to England by the news, that only the English have understood that they have to target the 'Boche. Ils font la guerre.' [the Germans. They are continuing the war]. But Desiré is still torn by his desire to fight and his unwillingness to bring more pain to his family, and it is his mother that finally persuades him to leave. This account bears a great resemblance to Kessel's own hesitation to join de Gaulle in London, he was equally shocked by the news of Mers El-Kébir.[45]

After setting off in a small boat across the Channel, they are strafed by a Messerschmitt, François is wounded and they are finally picked up by a Royal Navy patrol boat and transported to Kent. Pierre and François enlist as merchant seamen. Maudru, now called *Mauodriou* by his fellow English airmen (who cannot pronounce his name properly) wears a blue RAF uniform and is (very slowly) learning the most useful English words, including 'Let's have a drink'. But he is unhappy not be sent into action straight away, and seriously home sick, to which the constant refrain from his Squadron Leader is 'Don't think too much Mauodriou'. He persuades his superior officer to let him fly a special mission over the area he came from in Northern France where a strange triangle of smoking fires had been seen. From his bomber he finds it is next to his family's farmhouse, but he is hit by a massive amount of anti-aircraft fire and lands the sea. He saves his rear gunner, who is wounded, and manages to swim to shore where he recognises the beach he had left

[43] Kessel, *Les Maudru*, 39–47.

[44] Kessel, *Les Maudru*, 49, 62.

[45] Courrière, *Joseph Kessel*, p. 534-5. Kessel's books were banned by the German 'Otto List' (Otto Abetz was the German Ambassador to Paris), along with those of de Gaulle and many others in September 1940: Courrière, *Joseph Kessel*, 542.

from with Simon and François. He first goes to the home of the veteran *poilu* Pierre and changes his clothes and looks after his gunner. He cannot admit why he went to see Pierre before his parents. He needn't have worried, as it turns out his father had lit the bonfires to show the RAF where to bomb a German munitions depot. While Desiré had been away the Germans had shot one of his father's friends who had a radio, forced those with fishing boats to help with invasion planning, and successfully encouraged collaboration by selectively releasing POWs. The 'war had been over. I was in agreement and I showed it…[Now] I am going to make war on them in my own way… [As for Desiré]… you are to go back and come back and bomb the hell out of them [*foutre le feu*].'[46]

This very moving tale is the most 'realist' of all the texts mentioned here, and the most accessible to an ordinary audience. It is a tale of a humiliated *France Profonde* collaborating and finally waking up to the necessity of resistance. The anti- English sentiment of the beginning is never dispelled, except by Pierre, who regrets that the French and English had drifted apart since the battles he fought at the Dardanelles. But the tone changes as events do, and with no concessions to liberal sentimentality. It is a small and perfectly formed *vignette* of the transformation from acceptance of defeat to resistance and a form of inner Liberation.

Conclusions (en guise de…)

The writers who figure in this account are all characters who excel in a number of aspects in a consideration of nationalism and internationalism. They all lack what Sartre called 'bad faith [*mauvaise foi*]', for they have all put their lives on the line for their country and, they would all have argued, for wider ethical categories such as humankind. They all equally present a very coherent view of the world they wish to see, but not as academics (with the partial exception of de Rougemont) in terms of categories, but in terms of allegories, metaphors and imaginary discourses. These discourses are based on personal experience or immanent observations of the world around them. They have all seen their country burning 'from 10,000 metres', seen 'in ten minutes… three hundred years of patience and sunshine [burn]'[47] and they show the impact of that on the inhabitants and those who are fighting on the ground and in the air better than any historian could do.

Do they add anything to the world of 1945 as it is understood by historians and other more 'real world' commentators? These novels were as much 'facts' as any diplomatic document of the period, and ones that have had a continuing importance for over seventy years. In some ways they also seem, from our perspective, to describe what we think we 'know' about the period and its dilemmas. We could say that they have given a 'sound track', as Kessel would have put it, to an epoch. Very few ordinary French people of today know much about this period from reading historical tomes, and even less from those of political scientists. But these fictional writers have been constantly

[46] Kessel, *Les Maudru*, 72–80, 99–121.
[47] St-Exupéry, *Pilote de Guerre*, 81.

read since 1945, their discourses have become part of a national conversation in France and beyond. They do not therefore lack verisimilitude, and they have as a consequence become part of the writing of the new mythology of the West. If only for that reason they merit examination, which we have done here of necessity in a very cursory way.

But we could also add that any of the themes that are evoked have clear parallels with 'history' as it is understood by historians. France did collapse in 1940, most of the population did conclude that the war was over; the sinking of the French fleet at Mers El-Kébir persuaded many that England was as bad as Germany; collaboration was widespread, etc. The arguments among the Free French about de Gaulle were every bit as intense as Aron's description of St-Exupéry, and all the more real given that the writer was indeed formulating his ideas 'at 10,000 metres'. There are of course exceptions to this rule, as Gary was not on the Eastern Front, though his descriptions of it and of the depredations of the *Das Reich* division have more than stood the test of time; his views on nationalism are part of the French language on the topic: '*Le patriotisme, c'est l'amour des siens. Le nationalisme, c'est la haine des autres.'* The story told in *Les Maudru* by Kessel is imaginary including its accounts of RAF banter on Kent airfields (where Kessel nonetheless spent most of the war), but it has more than the ring of truth. It certainly fulfils the need to express the 'typical', which Lukacs saw as the exemplification of the 'authentic'. Their key and lasting appeal, I would suggest, is that the earthy realism of all of these writers goes to the heart of the concerns of most inhabitants of France, a country where there has always been an obsessional combination of patriotic fervour with a parallel obsession about the problems and benefits of physical and spiritual love. Both of these are in constant juxtaposition with their reflections on everyday politics.

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