Chapter 7

Post-Liberation Myth, Purge and Trials

On 6 June 1944, the Allied forces crossed the Channel and landed in Normandy, on the Northern coast of France. Paris was liberated on 24 August. On the 25th, General De Gaulle was acclaimed by the Parisians when he walked down the Champs-Elysées and entered Notre Dame Cathedral. He installed in Paris the Provisional Government of the French Republic, which had replaced the French Committee of National Liberation on 2 June. The Provisional Government re-established France’s democratic order and assumed authority, progressively, over the liberated parts of France. The Gaullist ordinance of 9 August 1944 regarding ‘the re-establishment of the republican legality’ affirmed that France’s government was and remained the Republic, and that, in law, it had not ceased to exist. It also noted the nullity of all acts contrary to democratic principles prescribed by Marshall Pétain and made all acts prescribed by De Gaulle enforceable in France. General elections were held on 21 October 1945 to set up an Assembly charged with the drafting of a new Constitution.

The newly-installed authorities were faced with daunting difficulties. War was not finished in the European theater until the German surrender of 8 May 1945, when the last part of France on the Atlantic coast (in Royan) was finally liberated. There were revolutionary movements in a few regions,
where Communist resistance groups took power and exercised summary justice. Armed groups had to be ordered to surrender their weapons, some were incorporated in the French armed forces which had landed on the Southern coast of France in August 1944.

There were political tensions between De Gaulle who wanted to institute a new Constitution with a strong executive and a weak Parliament to remedy the past ineffectiveness of the parliamentary system of the Third Republic. The socialists and the Christian Democrats wanted a return to the parliamentary regime. The Communists, first hoping for a Soviet-type revolution, realized its impossibility in a country with a large Allied military presence and without popular support.

The Vichy myth was replaced by a Gaullist myth: that the Vichy regime was illegitimate, the French Republic did not have to be refounded, it had not been abolished. The ‘dark years’ were not part of the ‘real France’.

However, the ‘real France’ was there, in conflict with itself: some historians described the pre-Liberation and post-Liberation periods as a civil war, or a virtual civil war. The French were torn between their respect for and faith in Marshal Pétain who had stopped the war in June 1940 and given some hope to the people, at least until November 1942, when the Allies invaded North Africa – and the new Gaullist authorities – yet un-elected – who had the prestige of the long-awaited Liberation, the military successes of the Allies, with the support of a revived French army, and of the Resistance movements within France. There was an urge for revenge: first against those who had openly and willingly collaborated with the Germans, against the Vichy leaders, against those who had carried out arrests, torture or executions of resisters. Then, in some areas, there was a social revenge against the elite, and private vendettas and denunciations unrelated to any political grounds. Illegal purges and abuses took place in many regions which the new authorities tried to channel through legal means: new legislation, new courts and mostly political trials.

This Chapter first refers to the Gaullist myths, then describes the new legislation and court system designed to try those who collaborated with the Germans. It reviews the illegal, non-judiciary and violent purges carried out in various parts of France before and after the Liberation, and the judiciary and administrative purges organized by the government. A few exemplary trials will be summarized: those of Pierre Pucheu, Marshal Philippe Pétain and Pierre Laval.