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The Second World War Archives of the Institut Français du Royaume Uni, London

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ABSTRACT

London was the first capital city of Free France, the French external resistance movement led by Charles de Gaulle. This city also hosted a dynamic French community and since 1910 a French Institute. This piece reviews the Second World War archives held at the French Institute, with a focus on the documents of its then director, Denis Saurat, who was one of the first London French to rally to de Gaulle. However, by 1942 Saurat had become a leading anti-Gaullist and the French Institute archives allow scholars to add nuance to the history of Free France and wartime Britain.

On a sunny October day in 2011, the Head Librarian of the French Institute in the United Kingdom, Ophélie Ramonatxo led me to a basement where the dim lighting revealed shelves stacked full of books and boxes. As we waded through the rooms, I felt distinctively overwhelmed by the large supply of documents that lay in front of me. This was my first encounter with the material I would be working on over the following years, first as part of my PhD, and later for other research projects. In this brief note, I shall discuss the wealth of records which have passed through the French Institute, with a particular focus on archives pertaining to the Second World War.¹

Ophélie Ramonatxo explained to me that only a few researchers had ever used the documents stored here. One room, for example, contained the '*fonds ancien*', a collection of books dating back to the seventeenth century. These included the *Bibliothèque universelle et historique* (1688) and a 1705 edition of *One Thousand and One Nights*, and such remarkable texts stood next to eighteenth century volumes by Voltaire, Fénelon, and Rousseau. In addition, a significant number of boxes contained

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¹The author would like to thank Chantal Morel, Françoise Watel, Cyril Daydé, Nicolas Christian and Italy Lotem for their help with this piece.

the untold institutional history of the French Institute, from its creation in 1910 to the present day.² Today, these archives are no longer stored at the French Institute and the rooms have been transformed and incorporated into a new children's library (the Bibliothèque Quentin Blake) that opened in 2015. Following a 2014 mission led by the archivist at the French Diplomatic Archives, Pierre Chancerel and thanks to the work of interns Cécilia Olympe and Lucie Humeau, the '*fonds ancien*' has been weeded and the remaining material was split between libraries in France and in the UK. The archives about the institute's history were sent to the French Diplomatic Archives in Nantes in the late 2010s.³

What remains in the much smaller archive of the French Institute are documents pertaining to its Second World War activities (in part because some are on loan or were donated by private individuals and therefore must remain *in situ*). These documents have received scant attention to date. And yet, they can tell us much about Franco-British wartime relations and the French external resistance in London. The British capital bears particular significance for historians of France since it was there that Charles de Gaulle created the resistance movement Free France in June 1940. At that time, the French Institute was a reputable French cultural centre, which drew de Gaulle's particular attention. As his headquarters at 4 Carlton Gardens rapidly proved too cramped for the growing resistance movement, the General mobilised the Institute – together with the adjacent French secondary school (now Lycée français Charles de Gaulle) – for the purposes of conducting propaganda and taking care of Free France administration.⁴

The lack of scholarly understanding about the French Institute's history became obvious to scholars during the 2010 commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the 18 June Appeal made by Charles de Gaulle from the BBC studio in London, which was organised by the Institute.⁵ The year 2010 also marked the celebration of the

²On the history of the French Institute see my doctoral thesis Charlotte Faucher, 'The "French Intellectual Consulate to Great Britain"? The Institut Français Du Royaume-Uni, 1910–1959' (Queen Mary University of London, 2016).

³Archives du service des Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, versement 2010-2014, carton n° 1553: rapport de mission à Londres de Pierre Chancerel (2014), accessed thanks to a waiver.

⁴On the lycée see Charlotte Faucher, 'Des Origines à La Veille de La Seconde Guerre Mondiale, 1915-1939', in *Le Lycée Français Charles de Gaulle de Londres, 1915–2015*, by Charlotte Faucher et al., (London: Association des Anciens Elèves du lycée Charles de Gaulle de Londres, 2015), pp.16–53.

⁵There remain few online traces of this events, but see

<https://www.oliviercadic.com/actu-%E2%80%93-commemoration-18-juin-1940/de-www.bjmh.org.uk>

French Institute's centenary. In 2011, Cyril Daydé, a heritage curator at the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in La Courneuve near Paris, visited the Institute during a short mission to highlight the historical and World War Two material of the institution. At that point, the archives of the Institute had recently been catalogued by the former Head Librarian Raymond Bérard, together librarians Chantal Morel and Céline Nonon.⁶ The archives therefore provided ideal, newly classified material for doctoral work which I undertook thanks to my supervisor Julian Jackson and his successful bid for an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award in partnership with the French Institute.⁷

Denis Saurat Archives

The core of the Second World War archives collection at the French Institute in London is made of the Denis Saurat collection, which was donated by the Saurat family. Denis Saurat was the Institute's Director from 1924 until 1945, when he was dismissed from his position owing to his political anti-Gaullist attitudes during the war. When I started my doctoral research, little was known about Saurat: There weren't - and still aren't - any book-length academic studies on Saurat, and historians tended to paint an image of friendship between him and the leader of the Free French. Credit must nonetheless be given to Jean-François Muracciole's short bibliographical notice in the *Dictionnaire de la France Libre*, in which he efficiently sums up Saurat's political engagement and difficult relations with de Gaulle, and to Martyn Cornick, who was the first researcher to study the Denis Saurat archives for a paper he gave in 2010 during the 18 June commemoration events at the French Institute.⁸ Using this collection, my doctoral work has revealed a complicated story of tension, political disagreement and ultimate break between de Gaulle and Saurat. This rupture occurred in 1942, as Saurat had become a fervent and vocal anti-Gaullist, who was critical of the 'military one man show' and lack of democracy within Free France. Certainly, Saurat was not alone in his anxiety about de Gaulle's authoritarian tendencies.⁹

[gaulle-londres-et-la-resistance-a-l-e2%80%99honneur-a-l-e2%80%99institut-francais/](https://www.franceinter.fr/archives/2010/06-18) and <https://www.franceinter.fr/archives/2010/06-18>

Accessed 28 August 2020.

⁶Interviews with Cyril Daydé and Chantal Morel, 4 September 2020.

⁷At the time, Julian Jackson was working on Charles de Gaulle and the role of the French Institute in introducing the general to Britain audiences was relevant to his research. See Julian Jackson, *Charles de Gaulle*, (London: Haus, 2003); Julian Jackson, *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

⁸Jean-François Muracciole, 'Saurat, Denis (1890-1958)', in *Dictionnaire de La France Libre*, ed. François Broche, Jean-François Muracciole, and Georges Caitucoli, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2010).

⁹Pierre Bloch, *De Gaulle, ou Le temps des méprises*, (Paris: La Table ronde, 1969); Henri de Kerillis, *De Gaulle dictateur. Une grande mystification de l'histoire*, (Montréal: Éditions

However, the position of public intellectual and specialist of French politics that he had carved for himself in London's media landscape - together with his leadership of the French Institute - meant that he was one of the figures best placed to effectively harm de Gaulle.¹⁰

The Denis Saurat collection is a fantastic repository of information for anyone with a desire to write about the London French wartime activities, de Gaulle's developing political ideas, or Free French tensions and networks, in particular with British Francophiles. While in the summer 1940, major figures refused to rally to Gaulle's project,¹¹ Denis Saurat's attitude was quite the opposite. Before the fall of France, he had given lectures and written on the importance of France fighting against Germany. He found in de Gaulle a burgeoning figure of a leader who shared some of his views on France and he rapidly put himself at the service of de Gaulle. De Gaulle was equally keen to keep Saurat in his entourage since Saurat was at the centre of a wide network of Francophiles and knew the British press very well – two elements which Saurat used to introduce de Gaulle to British audiences. Over the summer of 1940, on de Gaulle's request, the two men met almost daily. Saurat thus wrote down his many thoughts on these meetings and the Free French movement in very unconventional ways. While some of his notes do read like transcriptions of conversation he had had with de Gaulle, they also echo themes that had been important to Saurat's intellectual trajectory. Saurat also kept versions of speeches, letters, and newspapers articles about the Free France (these documents are stored in folders 21 and 35 of the archives, while the other folders are primarily collections of Saurat's fiction and non-fiction writing on occultism, poetry, folklore and British literature). In addition, these archives reveal Saurat's interest in civil matters within Free France (in particular the legal status of French men and women who had come to Britain as exiles and refugees during and after the Fall of France), something which de Gaulle disregarded in the summer 1940. They also offer a glimpse of de Gaulle's attitude when faced with early diplomatic tensions (the two men discussed in detail responses to the British naval

Beauchemin, 1945); Emmanuelle Loyer, *Paris à New York: intellectuels et artistes français en exil (1940–1947)*, (Paris: Grasset, 2005), pp. 188–92; Robert Belot, *La résistance sans de Gaulle : politique et gaullisme de guerre*, (Paris: Fayard, 2006). For french left-wing circles in London see also Emmanuelle Rey, 'La dissidence socialiste à Londres: le groupe Jean Jaurès et le quotidien France (août 1940–août 1944)' (MA thesis, Paris I, 1998).

¹⁰Charlotte Faucher, 'From Gaullism to Anti-Gaullism: Denis Saurat and the French Cultural Institute in Wartime London', *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 1 (2019): pp. 60–81.

¹¹Among those were Jean Monnet, then in charge of Franco British war production, leftist intellectuals (Henri Bonnet, Henri Laugier, Henri Longchambon) or pro-consuls in the colonies (the Generals Nogues, Peyrouton, Puaux and Mittelhauser).

attack on French Navy ships at Mers El Kébir in early July 1940 for example). We also learn about de Gaulle's indecisiveness when it came to attributing positions within a Free French committee.¹²

By the end of the summer 1940, de Gaulle was beginning to distance himself from this exuberant scholar of occultism for whom he now saw a more limited cultural and educative role as opposed to the more grandiose political ambition initially harboured by Saurat. In spite of the substantial gains de Gaulle made thanks to Saurat's public diplomacy strategies in the first months of Free France, the General later shattered Saurat's political aspirations. On the one hand de Gaulle no longer needed his erstwhile intellectual ally. On the other, new individuals more amenable to de Gaulle, in particular René Cassin, had joined the movement and rose to positions in education and civilian administration that Saurat had coveted.

Gradually excluded from de Gaulle's close circle, Saurat continued to support Free France through the French Institute (organising lectures in particular) and networking with British Francophiles. He also began to meet with anti-Gaullists, such as Roger Cambon the former minister-counsellor at the French embassy and André Labarthe, who had rallied to de Gaulle on June 1940.¹³ At the Institute, Saurat sheltered and contributed to *La France Libre*, a largely anti-Gaullist magazine edited by Labarthe and the young philosopher Raymond Aron (issues of *La France Libre* are now part of the Free France archives of the French Institute). Saurat's anti-Gaullism is apparent throughout his archives, which thus constitute an important and rare opportunity to appreciate how some French men in London considered they were resisting the Nazi enemy, and yet did not support de Gaulle's movement.¹⁴ While Saurat's hostility to Free France stemmed from a strong personal bitterness over how de Gaulle had gradually stopped requesting his help on the one hand, it also reflected a deep belief in democracy and international military cooperation, which he saw as two key elements of the French resistance but which ran counter to de Gaulle's strategy. In 1945, Saurat was dismissed from the directorship of the French Institute by the French authorities. By then, he considered that Gaullists had purposely conspired against him and saw himself as a victim who had been silenced.

¹²Archives de l'Institut Français du Royaume Uni (thereafter AIFRU), Denis Saraut collection, folder 35.

¹³Robert Belot, 'Labarthe, André (1902–1967)', in *Dictionnaire de la France libre*, ed. François Broche and Jean-François Muracciole, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2010).

¹⁴On anti-Gaullism amongst the Resistance see also Julian Jackson, 'General de Gaulle and His Enemies: Anti-Gaullism in France since 1940', *Transactions of The Royal Historical Society* sixth series, no. xi (1999): 43–65; Nicholas Atkin, *The Forgotten French: Exiles in the British Isles, 1940–44*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

These thoughts are best illustrated in a draft of a memoir that Saurat never completed or published, and in which he reflects on the decline of his own relationship with Free France and de Gaulle, but also on what he perceived to be a toxic atmosphere within the Gaullist movement in general. The long table of content reflects Saurat's sense of self-worth: he had a high esteem of his role in London¹⁵ and saw himself as a victim of not only de Gaulle, but also of the British.¹⁶ The text's most defining characteristic was a feeling of resentment towards de Gaulle and one marginal comment even read "The general is the double of King Pétain; de Gaulle gives the same interpretation". Throughout the short typescript, Saurat compares de Gaulle and Pétain on multiple occasions, outlining that "there is a secret and deep harmony between these two - seemingly enemy- reigns? In reality, they were mere competitors: they wanted the supreme seat when really, there was only one seat". Later in the text, he uses the word "dictator" to describe both men (a trope that other anti-Gaullists had resorted to),¹⁷ and in a final trait of bitter humor which reinforces de Gaulle's reputation of being wrathful, Saurat mused:

My general, there are three things to be said against wrath:

1. It is a deadly sin
2. It is not a means of governing
3. This always triggers acts of counter-wrath which are also deadly sins and not a means of governing.¹⁸

Free French archives

The Institute holds additional Second World War archives that are testament to its wartime activities and to its role as a research centre in French studies and French history in the United Kingdom. The periodical collection is particularly impressive and constitutes an excellent complement to materials available at the British Library, the University of Oxford library and at the War and Culture Studies Archive Collection

¹⁵AIFRU, Denis Saurat collection, unfinished memoir: Chapter 57 : "Without me, there would be nothing"

¹⁶AIFRU, Denis Saurat collection, unfinished memoir: Chapter 59 : "Too pro English to be used by de Gaulle Too pro de Gaulle to be used by the English"

¹⁷Raymond Aron, "L'Ombre des Bonapartes", *La France Libre*, (6) 34, August 1943, 280–8. David Drake, *Intellectuals and Politics in Post-War France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 45. Accusations of Bonapartism were also made in the American press and French exiles in the US. See Alison Appleby, 'The British Left Intelligentsia and France: Perceptions and Interactions 1930-1944' (PhD thesis, Royal Holloway University of London, 2013), 179.

¹⁸AFRU, Denis Saurat Collection, folder 21.

THE SWW ARCHIVES OF THE INSTITUT FRANÇAIS DU ROYAUME UNI

at the University of Bristol (previously at the University of Westminster).¹⁹ Periodicals in French published in London during the Second World War are precious to historians of the French in London and of the resistance; they include *France* and the aforementioned *France Libre* as well as newspapers about the colonial resistance such as *France d'abord*, *Revue des Forces Libres d'Afrique* and *France Orient*.

The Institute archives also hold the Joan Delin archive (donated by Delin in 2001), which is made up of monographs and memoirs about the French Resistance, notes and recordings accumulated by Joan Delin during research for her thesis.²⁰ Delin also gathered an impressive collection of primary sources on public opinion, Free French radio programs, Free French scouts in Britain, Gaullist military operation, as well as unique material such as the author's correspondence with the British Legion, documents about the Free French cadets and the Free French aerial forces. The final section of the Delin archive consists of recordings between the author and researchers, former resistance fighters, British supporters of de Gaulle and French people who lived in Britain during the war. Interviewees include the British Operation Office and historian of the SOE Michael Foot, Charles Guillois, the Breton soldier who joined de Gaulle and ran a BBC radio show in Breton language during which he called all Breton soldiers to join Free France. Others have less well-known war time trajectories, such as Mme Ragody Hughes, whose mother ran the 'Friends of Free France' association in Wales during the war. Under the auspices of this charity, she organised 'Flag days' to raise money, exhibitions to promote Free France and its ideas to Welsh audiences.²¹

Conclusion

The French Institute in the United Kingdom receives frequent requests from history enthusiasts, journalists and researchers who wish to read the Free French archives, hoping to access administrative, political, and military documents about the movement. Disappointment often follows as such material is stored at the National Archives in Pierrefitte and the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in La Courneuve ('London-Algiers collection'). And yet, the material deposited at the French Institute in London is precious in many other respects: it might not trace the

¹⁹On The War and Culture Studies Archive at the University of Bristol, see the brief introduction by Prof Martin Hurcombe,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce1orvqiVdU> (accessed 1 September 2020).

²⁰Joan Delin, PhD thesis: *L'opinion britannique et les Français en Grande-Bretagne pendant l'année 1940*, (University of Lille, 1993).

²¹Arlette Ragody-Hughes et John Martin, 'Centenaire De Société Franco-Britannique De Cardiff 1906 -2006' <http://www.francais-a-cardiff.org.uk/history/centenary-history-en.pdf>. Accessed 3 September 2020. On French charities and Franco-British groups in Britain during the war see Atkin, *The Forgotten French*.

grand narrative of the French external resistance, but rather helps to integrate the tension and disagreement, and also the role of civil society as well as journalists in supporting and examining the movement during and after the war. It is only by appreciating the challenges from within European resistance groups and the self-reflection of members of the Resistance that we can write a history of the Second World War.