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The Elegance of Survival: French Perfume Houses, Logistics and the Politics of Continuity, 1940–1945

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ABSTRACT
While the Second World War severely disrupted the French economy, the perfume industry maintained both its activity and prestige. Between 1940 and 1945, leading firms devised ingenious logistical strategies to overcome shortages, blockades, and surveillance through material substitution, recycling, parallel trade, and chemical innovation. Supported by the Vichy regime and regarded as a vehicle of national prestige, the sector adapted to supply chain breakdowns through a mix of circumvention and compromise. The inventiveness displayed by French perfume houses during the Occupation foreshadowed a distinctive form of logistical resilience that later shaped the post-war revival of France's luxury industry.

Introduction

War is not fought solely on the battlefields but also in the silent margins of production, distribution, and consumption. Military history has traditionally privileged strategies, armies, and technologies, often neglecting the critical role of civilian logistics and industrial networks that underpinned wartime resilience. In this context, the case of the French perfume industry under the Occupation presents a compelling paradox: how could a sector associated with frivolity, refinement, and luxury not only endure but also strategically adapt amidst systemic scarcity and authoritarian oversight? This research note examines how, between 1940 and 1945, the French perfume houses devised intricate logistical strategies operating at the intersection of commerce, diplomacy, and State policy, negotiating shortages, blockades, and political supervision.

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By tracing both the material and symbolic circulations sustaining this sector, it demonstrates that luxury logistics constituted a distinctive form of civilian logistics in wartime – discreet, adaptive, and intimately linked with national prestige and economic continuity. Perfume thus emerges as an unexpected object of military history, invisible on the front lines yet essential to sustaining the nation's economic stability and symbolic capital, complementing the reflections of Marc Bloch on the 'strange defeat'.[1]

Adopting a supply chain perspective, the analysis recasts the perfume industry as a complex system of circulation and strategic adaptation rather than mere creation, emphasising the interdependencies between raw materials, artisanal expertise, and international trade. It shifts attention from the conventional language of taste and femininity to the material infrastructures, administrative practices, and diplomatic negotiations that enabled survival under German Occupation. This approach invites a reassessment of luxury as a mode of organised resilience and tactical ingenuity, wherein scarcity became a catalyst for innovation, negotiation, and calculated compromise. By foregrounding such discreet mechanisms of continuity, the study moves beyond moral or aesthetic readings to reveal the logistical intelligence embedded in routines of production, substitution, and exchange, highlighting the sector's remarkable adaptive capacity under extreme constraint. In this sense, perfume becomes not merely an emblem of refinement, but a lens for understanding how France's most symbolically potent industries navigated constraint, preserved international reach, and redefined the grammar of elegance and endurance during wartime.

To situate these sectoral dynamics within their broader geopolitical framework, it is necessary to recall that during the Occupation the French economy became deeply integrated into the system of economic exploitation organised by Nazi Germany across Europe. The armistice of 22 June 1940 did not merely mark the cessation of military operations on French soil; it also inaugurated an administrative, financial, and commercial framework designed to redirect French resources towards the German war effort. As François Boudot demonstrated in his still influential study of the economic structures of the Occupation, this system relied in particular on the Franco-German clearing mechanism and on a range of regulatory instruments intended to supervise production and control the circulation of goods.[2] Requisitions of raw materials, administrative oversight of firms, and the reorganisation of commercial networks thus contributed to the progressive integration of the French economy into a war economy dominated by the Reich. Within such environment – characterised by

[1]Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940,* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968 [1940]).

[2]François Boudot, 'Aspects économiques de l'Occupation allemande en France', *Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, 54 (1964), pp.48-50.

scarcity, financial pressure, and territorial fragmentation – even sectors traditionally associated with luxury, including the perfume industry, were compelled to adjust to profoundly altered conditions. Their survival depended less on the intrinsic value of their products than on their capacity to navigate, negotiate, and occasionally circumvent the constraints imposed by the structures of Occupation.

Luxury under Fire

The debacle of May–June 1940 plunged France into a dual collapse, military and economic, that unsettled even its most emblematic industries, none more so than perfume. Centred in both Grasse (near Nice) and Paris, the perfume houses, established commercial firms combining artisanal craftsmanship, chemical laboratories, and international trade networks to produce and distribute luxury fragrances, embodied a lifestyle that political authorities celebrated as a showcase of 'national genius'. From the outset, these firms were recognised not only as commercial enterprises but as instruments of French cultural identity, connecting industrial, artisanal, and diplomatic circuits that extended far beyond metropolitan borders. Their symbolic role as a vehicle of national prestige was frequently highlighted in trade bulletins, propaganda reports, and governmental correspondence, reflecting the intertwining of luxury and sovereignty during wartime. Though often dismissed as the epitome of French frivolity, the sector rested upon a deeply globalised logistical network: imported essences from the colonies, such as ylang-ylang, vetiver, vanilla, or patchouli, and solvents from metropolitan chemical industries, and bottles crafted by Baccarat or Lalique, supported exports to the United States, South America, and the Middle East.[3] By 1939, more than seventy per cent of the sector's revenue derived from exports, rendering its economic equilibrium acutely vulnerable to supply disruptions. This hybrid system, blending artisanal savoir-faire with proto-industrial organisation, revealed a sophisticated logistical framework reliant on imperial and maritime infrastructures. When the Second World War broke out, perfume paradoxically became both a strategic commodity and a marker of identity, with its preservation a means of sustaining an emblematic product while maintaining access to the international markets vital for survival.

Understanding these dynamics requires recognising the agencies involved: the major perfume houses, their networks of managers, brokers, and artisans, and the coordinating role of the Chambre Syndicale de la Parfumerie Française (French Perfumery Association) in managing production priorities, negotiating transport permits, and overseeing scarce resources. Far from being a mere advisory body, the Chambre Syndicale brought together all the perfume houses established in Grasse and Paris, forming an extensive professional network capable of significantly influencing

[3]Eugénie Briot, 'From industry to luxury: French perfume in the nineteenth century', *Business History Review*, 85, 2 (2011), pp.275-279.

political and economic decisions. It comprised some thirty influential members, including Guerlain, Coty, Caron, and Chanel, who wielded considerable power through their diplomatic connections. Integrated into transnational networks, these players can secure raw materials and solvents, while maintaining trade flows to American and Latin American markets despite the constraints. The tensions between Grasse and Paris reflected both specialisation strategies and strategic control: the Grasse cluster retained artisanal expertise and access to local raw materials, while Paris centralised mass production, marketing, and exports. Such dynamics illustrate the importance of individual and collective agency, as each house, according to its size, influence, and network, negotiated with the Vichy regime, the German authorities, and international intermediaries, finding a delicate balance between autonomy, constraint, and sectoral coordination. As Dorota Leszczyńska and Nada Khachlouf emphasise, the maintenance and resilience of the cluster depended as much on the entrenchment of collective knowledge and skills as on the organisational structures and strategies of the actors.[4] The interplay between these different levels indicates that the survival of the perfume industry during the Occupation was not merely a matter of market forces, but rather the result of a strategic and diplomatic capacity supported by the expertise and influence of the sector's leaders.

The German Occupation and the division of France in 1940 into the Occupied Zone and the so-called Free Zone swiftly disrupted this fragile equilibrium. The maritime blockade, together with acute shortages of raw materials, the requisitioning of factories, and heightened surveillance of transport, brought supply chains to near collapse.[5] To prevent the total disintegration of the sector, the Chambre Syndicale devised a continuity plan intended to safeguard a core of production and technical expertise, with coordination extending beyond administrative supervision: it facilitated exchanges between factories, managed clandestine imports via neutral territories, and liaised with officials in both Vichy and the Occupied Zone, effectively functioning as a quasi-strategic logistical authority. The leading companies benefited from existing stocks, established diplomatic contacts, and connections with colonial suppliers, while smaller artisans were compelled to improvise through chemical substitution, bottle reuse, and shared workshops. In doing so, they exemplified a form of industrial resilience rooted in both skill and strategic foresight. A rudimentary command of logistics thus became an instrument of survival, transforming the notion of luxury into a synonym for ingenuity and endurance. Keen to preserve export revenues, the Vichy regime lent partial support to this adaptation, integrating the perfume houses into its

[4]Dorota Leszczyńska and Nada Khachlouf, 'L'influence de l'enracinement du savoir sur l'évolution d'un cluster: Etude de la trajectoire historique de l'industrie des parfums de Grasse', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 92 (2016), pp.201-213.
[5]Julian T. Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.162.

wider economic apparatus. This support formed part of an ambivalent political strategy, simultaneously ensuring economic continuity and demonstrating the regime's claim to national sovereignty.

Under the now-famous motto '*Travail, Famille, Patrie*' (Work, Family, Fatherland), the Vichy regime promoted a vision of moral and cultural regeneration that celebrated traditional symbols of French identity and refinement.[6] Within this ideological framework, perfume and other luxury crafts were implicitly associated with the idea of an 'eternal France', a France of artisanal excellence and aesthetic distinction. Official reports and internal memos suggest that the regime viewed these industries as emblematic of French ingenuity, capable of projecting soft power abroad while maintaining domestic morale. The *Commissariat Général à la Production Industrielle* (General Commissariat for Industrial Production) established mechanisms of economic collaboration designed to maintain the continuity of certain trade flows in exchange for controlled deliveries to Nazi Germany.[7] Firms in Grasse and Paris entered joint ventures supervised by the German authorities, securing essential raw materials, fuel, and transport permits while navigating the political tightrope between collaboration and survival. This form of logistical collaboration—at once imposed and opportunistic, blurred the boundaries between accommodation and complicity.[8] As Rachel Chin observes, the Vichy regime grounded its legitimacy in a rhetoric of national continuity. By claiming to embody the 'true France', it sought to justify political and economic decisions that consolidated its authority while placating the occupying power.[9] This discourse, conflating cultural preservation with strategic submission, finds a direct echo in the way the luxury economy was mobilised as a symbolic instrument of national endurance.

Amid acute shortages and the rise of a thriving black market, the French perfume houses were transformed into a veritable laboratory of industrial and logistical

[6]Jane F. Fulcher underlines that the Vichy regime sought to redefine the meaning of *Frenchness* through a programme of moral and cultural regeneration rooted in the values of *Travail, Famille, Patrie*. While her analysis focuses on musical culture, in Chapter 1 of her book, she situates these policies within a broader ideological effort to restore what the regime portrayed as the nation's authentic traditions and refined heritage. Jane F. Fulcher, *Renegotiating French Identity: Musical Culture and Creativity in France during Vichy and the German Occupation,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[7]Julian T. Jackson, p.185 ff.

[8]Luc-André Brunet, 'Patrons résistants? French industrialists during the Second World War', *French History*, 31, 4 (2017), p.513.

[9]Rachel Chin, 'Who speaks for France? Vichy, Free France and the battle over French legitimacy: 1940-1942', *British Journal for Military History*, 6, 3 (2020), p.10.

innovation. Constraints spurred the development of alternative processes: agricultural distillation for solvents, the recovery of animal by-products for fixatives, and the systematic recycling of containers. Grasse's artisans relied on semi-clandestine networks linking the Free Zone to North Africa, Spain, and Switzerland, illustrating the capacity of peripheral actors to negotiate, bypass, and stabilise fragile supply chains.[10] These adaptive practices were guided by both technical knowledge and strategic reasoning: choices over chemical substitution, storage prioritisation, and export destinations reflected careful calculation rather than ad hoc improvisation. Within this unstable environment, perfume houses reinvented an economy of scarcity and circumvention, turning constraint itself into a catalyst for adaptation. As Kenneth Mouré notes, the experience of a planned economy and of State-imposed price controls, soon condemned as a form of 'economic tyranny', would profoundly shape post-war industrial culture.[11] Building on this experience, French perfumers approached the Liberation with a newly acquired logistical expertise and organisational discipline, enabling them to transform the management of scarcity into a durable strategic asset.

Networks of Necessity

The perfume houses of Grasse were far from an isolated case, instead forming a central node in the wartime logistics of French luxury industries. Indeed, the archives of the *Commissariat Général aux Affaires Economiques* (General Commissariat for Economic Affairs) under the Vichy regime, together with those of trade associations representing various luxury sectors, including the Chambre Syndicale, reveal a complex mosaic of arrangements involving colonial suppliers, neutral countries, and carefully negotiated accommodation with the occupying authorities.[12] Administrative reports from the period indicate that the Vichy regime regarded perfume not merely as an economic commodity, but as a vehicle for national prestige and a tool for political legitimation. Internal communications from the *Commissariat Général* emphasised that maintaining perfume production and exports was a strategic priority for upholding the international reputation of 'Made in France'.[13] Far from a marginal concern amidst widespread privation, the luxury economy assumed significant diplomatic and political

[10]This issue was swiftly taken up by Robert Chollot, an executive at the Charabot company in Grasse, a firm specialising in the production and supply of raw materials for the flavour and fragrance industries, precisely because of its sensitive, even taboo, nature. Robert Chollot, 'The commercial history of Grasse', *Perfumer & Favorist*, 9 (1984), p.76.

[11]Kenneth Mouré, "Economic tyranny' and public anger in France, 1945-1947', *Contemporary European History*, 33, 2 (2024), p.456.

[12]Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise,* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p.100.

[13]French National Archives, AJ/40 to AJ/43.

weight.[14] French perfume houses were thus compelled to combine chemical innovation, administrative ingenuity, and commercial discretion, generating a parallel geography of trade flows connecting African ports, Swiss trading posts, and French factories.[15]

From 1941 onwards, shortages of essential oils from Indochina, Madagascar, the Comoros Islands and Thailand severely disrupted established supply chains.[16] Since the 1920s, the Indian Ocean had in fact constituted a particularly important zone of procurement for the French perfume industry, owing to the exceptional quality of its aromatic resources, including fragrant woods, clove, vanilla, ylang-ylang, and cinnamon.[17] In response to disruptions, producers in Grasse intensified the cultivation of lavender, mimosa, and other locally available raw materials, while laboratories in Lyon refined synthetic molecules derived from wartime pharmaceutical research. This increasing reliance on applied chemistry formed part of a longer tradition of industrial innovation established in the late nineteenth century, when leading European firms, particularly German ones, systematically integrated scientific research into their core production processes.[18] As Carolyn Cobbold underlines in her study of chemical additives and industrial dyes, European firms systematically embedded scientific expertise into production networks, linking technical research to commercial and

[14]Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 2nd ed.), chapter 5.

[15]For a critical analysis of the adaptation strategies adopted by French companies during the Occupation, see Patrick Fridenson, 'French Enterprises under German Occupation, 1940-1944', in Harold James and Jakob Tanner (eds.), *Enterprise in the Period of Fascism in Europe,* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.259-269.

[16]The case of Thailand, an important supplier of essential oils, is instructive, though it remains comparatively little known. At the end of 1940, the country declared war on France in order to recover the territories in Laos and Cambodia that it had lost between 1893 and 1907. The conflict concluded with a Thai victory, largely because France was unable to deploy the necessary men and equipment to confront Thai forces, which were supported by Japan. The war consequently brought the importation of essential oils to an immediate halt. Madison Dubois, *L'industrie du parfum dans les Alpes-Maritimes du XIXe au XXe siècle: Entre développement économique, encadrement public et protections juridiques*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Université Côte d'Azur, September 2022, p.662.

[17]Mathilde Cocoual, *Aux sources des parfums: Industrialisation et approvisionnement de la parfumerie grassoise (milieu XIXe–milieu XXe siècle)*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Université Côte d'Azur, December 2017, pp.425-426.

[18]Ernst Homburg, 'The emergence of research laboratories in the dyestuffs industry, 1870–1900', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 25, 1 (1992), p.98.

regulatory frameworks.[19] This historical perspective reinforces the understanding that French perfume chemists drew upon a cross-national culture of applied chemistry, transforming scarcity into innovation while operating under complex economic and political constraints.

Throughout the Second World War, the *Bulletin de la Société Chimique de France* emphasised that this adaptation relied on a culture of applied research and advanced training for local chemists.[20] The trend mirrored a broader European movement towards the chemicalisation of luxury, wherein scientific expertise increasingly supplanted natural ingredients. *Bulletin* issues from 1942 to 1944 document the use of novel synthesis methods, experimentation with local substitutes, optimisation of industrial processes, and rigorous evaluation by specialised scientific committees. French chemists adapted their techniques to preserve the olfactory identity of renowned perfume houses despite chronic shortages. Substitutes, aldehydes, such as nitro-musks, and acetates, helped maintain symbolic and patriotic continuity, as perfume, now a rarity, assumed moral, cultural, and national significance. Formulas were simplified, bottles miniaturised, and frugality became synonymous with elegance. For instance, major houses such as Guerlain issued *Mitsouko* and other perfumes in 'war time edition' bottles produced in plain clear glass without the usual decorative elements, reflecting material constraints and a move towards sobriety in packaging. This technical creativity also acquired a political dimension: mastery of olfactory synthesis represented an act of scientific independence contested between Vichy and German authorities.

Material constraints further affected both production and planning. Shortages of glass, metal, and alcohol forced continual reorganisation of industrial routines. The economic departments of the Vichy regime imposed strict rationing on non-ferrous metals, and paper, and cardboard, granting exceptional exemptions only to internationally prominent perfume houses.[21] Smaller workshops, in contrast, developed a culture of resourcefulness: systematically recycling, retrieving and refilling bottles, repackaging under improvised conditions, and engaging in inter-professional barter to maintain minimal activity. Commercially, the closure of Allied markets compelled producers to bypass official trade routes. Perfumes were channelled through Switzerland, Portugal, and Spain in semi-clandestine operations destined for

[19]Carolyn Cobbold, *A Rainbow Palate: How Chemical Dyes Changed the West's Relationship with Food,* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).
[20]See Bulletin issues available at https://delibra.bg.polsl.pl/dlibra. Accessed 13 June 2026.
[21]Chad Denton, "Récupérez!' The German origins of French wartime salvage drives, 1939-1945', *Contemporary European History*, 22, 3 (2013), p.400; and French National Archives, AJ/40 to AJ/43.

the United States and Latin America. These discreet exchanges, negotiated by brokers, intermediaries, and occasionally diplomats, provided the foreign currency essential for importing raw materials and sustaining production.[22] Perfume thus became both a cultural showcase and a medium of economic resilience: a luxury product transformed into an instrument of survival within a shadow economy, whose logistical dexterity operating between legality and ingenuity remains largely overlooked in business history.

No major perfume house illustrates these contradictions more vividly than Chanel, whose factory in Neuilly-sur-Seine, near Paris, remained operational under German supervision throughout the Occupation.[23] Stocks of the celebrated N°5 were guarded continuously, while the brand maintained a discreet yet ongoing presence in the United States. Gabrielle Chanel repeatedly attempted to regain control of the company by exploiting Aryanisation laws and cultivating highly ambiguous relationships with Nazi officials.[24] In short, Gabrielle Chanel played a complex economic and diplomatic role, navigating between forced collaboration and maintaining the company as a symbol of French prestige. This behaviour was tolerated by the Vichy regime, mindful of the symbolic importance of certain perfume houses in preserving the cultural grandeur of a nation scarred by its 1940 collapse. This dual strategy – well documented by historians – reveals an approach driven as much by survival as by calculated compromise and diplomatic manoeuvring. Briefly interrogated after the Liberation on charges of collaboration, Gabrielle Chanel ultimately avoided prosecution, largely owing to interventions by Winston Churchill and her contacts within Swiss and Spanish diplomatic circles. Like many owners of leading French perfume houses, she successfully steered a precarious course between economic pragmatism and political calculation, ensuring the preservation of supply chains essential to the continuity – and post-war revival – of her enterprise.

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[22]On this point, several relevant perspectives can be found in the collection edited by Lou Taylor and Marie McLoughlin, *Paris Fashion and World War Two: Global Diffusion and Nazi Control,* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

[23]Hal Vaughan, *Sleeping with the Enemy: Coco Chanel's Secret War,* (New York: Vintage, 2011), chapter 7.

[24]Within the framework of its anti-Jewish legislation, the Vichy regime sought to 'purify' certain sectors of the French economy, as noted by Michel Margairaz and Henry Rousso, 'Vichy, la guerre et les entreprises', *Histoire, Economie & Société*, 11, 3 (1992), p.354. It should be recalled that in 1940 the owner of Chanel holding seventy per cent of the company was Pierre Wertheimer, the son of a Jewish family from Alsace who had settled in Paris after 1871. In order to escape the German Occupation, he took refuge in the United States, leaving Gabrielle Chanel with full decision-making authority over the company; and Hal Vaughan, p.149.

Logistical Resilience

The case of French perfumers during the Second World War stands today as a textbook example of logistical resilience.[25] While much of the French economy collapsed under Occupation, leading perfume houses managed to preserve an unexpected vitality, drawing on both pre-war international networks and diplomatic connections. In a nation subjected to rationing, Occupation oversight, and the curtailment of civilian trade, perfume, like haute couture, continued to be produced and sought after, albeit only available in limited quantities, reflecting both economic ingenuity and cultural persistence. The Vichy regime explicitly framed luxury production as a symbol of national prestige, with the *Commissariat Général* facilitating mechanisms to maintain trade continuity in exchange for regulated deliveries to Germany, highlighting the political as well as economic stakes involved. Beyond routine commercial activity, a remarkably inventive system emerged, relying on alternative supply chains, recycling, semi-clandestine negotiations, and intricate networks of intermediaries, including brokers, diplomats, and colonial administrators. Wartime adaptations in the French perfume industry thus built upon much older international supply systems: by the early twentieth century, firms such as the Chiris group in Grasse had established extraction facilities and procurement networks extending across North Africa, the Indian Ocean, Indochina, and Southeast Asia, supplying European perfumers with essential raw materials on a global scale.[26] This grey economy, tolerated by Vichy and closely monitored by the occupiers, sustained a delicate equilibrium between constraint and autonomy.

Such arrangements illustrate the nuanced agency of both organisations and individual actors, challenging simplistic narratives of Collaboration or Resistance and situating the perfumery sector within broader historiographical debates on adaptation under Occupation. In the aftermath of the war, French luxury appeared to rise phoenix-like from the ashes, led by Chanel, Dior, Balmain, and Carven, with Gabrielle Chanel returning to France in 1954 after nearly a decade in Switzerland, while her network of international contacts had ensured the continuity of N°5 throughout the Occupation. Yet this renaissance rested upon the infrastructure, expertise, and

[25]Logistical resilience refers to the capacity of a supply chain to withstand disruptions, adapt to them, and recover rapidly while maintaining or restoring its essential functions. It encompasses flexibility, redundancy, visibility, collaboration, and a swift response to crises such as natural disasters, supply chain breakdowns, or pandemics. On this point, see the seminal contribution by Martin Christopher and Helen Peck, 'Building the resilient supply chain'. *International Journal of Logistics Management*, 15, 2 (2004), pp.1-13.

[26]Eliane Perrin, Marcel Baumann and Olivier Buttner, 'Fondation, croissance, opportunités et déclin de la production des matières premières pour la parfumerie: L'exemple de Chiris (1768–1967)', *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 92 (2016), pp.222-223.

logistical networks painstakingly developed under wartime constraints. Scarcity necessitated the rationalisation of production processes, pooling of resources, and unusually close collaboration among artisans, chemists, and managers, demonstrating a form of organisational resilience that prefigured modern logistics. Wartime alliances proved unexpectedly durable, forming the backbone of postwar industrial partnerships, while advances in chemical synthesis accelerated olfactory experimentation, securing France's avant-garde position globally. By emphasising both material ingenuity and human agency, this episode reframes luxury not merely as aesthetic consumption but as a strategic and adaptive system, linking the perfumery sector to broader considerations of industrial and economic history during the Occupation.

The history of French perfumery during the Second World War was ultimately less a tragic parenthesis than a moment of industrial lucidity. Operating under acute material scarcity, political oversight, and moral ambiguity, the sector displayed a capacity for adaptation that transformed constraint into opportunity and innovation. Beneath the patriotic rhetoric of preserving the *goût français* i.e. French taste values elegance, refinement, quality, and effortless style, a discreet logistical intelligence operated, its finesse often bordering on diplomatic craft, as exemplified by the strategies of Gabrielle Chanel and other house managers. By navigating the porous boundaries between collaboration and circumvention, the major perfume houses safeguarded what truly mattered: their brands, networks, and prestige. This strategic foresight, cultivated through decades of artisanal and industrial experience, within an industry whose development had long relied on the interaction between perfumery, chemical research, and pharmaceutical expertise, highlights the intertwined economic, cultural, and political dimensions of luxury, demonstrating that resilience relied as much on agency, negotiation, and moral calculation as on production. [27] Whether one chooses to admire or to criticise it, the legacy of the Second World War endures: a model in which elegance thrives on ambiguity, opportunism, and the artful management of compromise.

Conclusion

This research note suggests that the perfume industry transcends the narrow confines of a luxury sector, offering a crucial lens through which to examine the complexity of economic and political interactions under the Occupation. Perfume houses were far more than commercial actors: they embodied networks of expertise, diplomatic connections, and transnational logistics capable of operating amid profound crises. Their activity exemplifies how an industrial sector can reorganise, innovate, and

[27]Quentin Jagodzinski and Anne Dalmasso, 'Acteurs et territoire: L'écosystème industriel des cosmétiques français au XX[e] siècle', *Entreprises & Histoire*, 111 (2023), pp.17-18.

preserve profitability even under authoritarian control. In this sense, perfumery constitutes a paradigmatic case of resilience, in which brand preservation emerged as a central strategic objective that was underpinned by managerial pragmatism. Archival evidence from the French National Archives indicates that the Vichy regime explicitly recognised perfume as a vehicle of national prestige, positioning certain houses within a 'zone of tolerance' defined by stringent political directives. This dual logic, combining relative autonomy with imposed constraints, underscores the capacity of private actors to negotiate and exploit the limited scope for manoeuvre afforded by an authoritarian regime.

The study of French perfumery offers a particularly revealing vantage point from which to reconsider several important, yet still insufficiently explored, questions in the economic history of the Occupation. Rather than reproducing the familiar binary that opposes resistance to collaboration, it encourages a more graduated interpretation of corporate behaviour, one attentive to the wide spectrum of practices that emerged under conditions of constraint. Within this framework, firms adopted a range of responses that combined pragmatic adaptation, tactical negotiation, and, in many cases, carefully calibrated compromise. The perfume industry is especially well suited to such analysis because it brings into focus the interdependence of economic organisation, managerial decision-making, political pressure, and social networks. Investigating the strategies pursued by perfume houses reveals how companies sought to manoeuvre within the overlapping demands of the German occupying authorities and the regulatory agenda of the Vichy regime. Their actions were shaped not only by immediate shortages and administrative controls, but also by the imperative to preserve export markets, protect specialised expertise, and maintain the symbolic and commercial value of established brands in a context of acute uncertainty.

Approached from such perspective, the wartime trajectory of French perfume houses illuminates broader dynamics within the French economy under occupation. Firms were compelled to rethink procurement strategies, reorganise production, and cultivate new channels of supply to mitigate disruptions to international trade and colonial provisioning. Comparable adjustments can be observed in other sectors, including large manufacturing concerns such as Lesieur, which undertook far-reaching reorganisation of its supply chains to maintain efficient sourcing.[28] In both cases, the

[28]The French company Lesieur, specialised in the processing of oilseeds and the production of edible oils, extended part of its operations to North Africa and French West Africa during the Second World War to secure access to raw materials and sustain production despite the disruptions caused by the Occupation. Under the supervision of its managing director, Jacques Lemaigre-Dubreuil, industrial facilities were notably consolidated in Casablanca and Dakar from 1941 onwards. This strategy aligned with the economic policies of the Vichy regime and can be interpreted as a

preservation of productive capacity required a delicate balance between compliance with regulatory demands and the defence of long-term commercial interests. What emerges from these experiences is a more complex understanding of corporate resilience, grounded not in heroic narratives but in the everyday practices of negotiation, improvisation, and institutional flexibility. The example of French perfumers therefore places the luxury sector at the centre of historiographical debates on economic life during the Occupation, highlighting the extent to which businesses were obliged to navigate the moral, political, and material ambiguities created by foreign domination.

form of pragmatic economic collaboration aimed primarily at ensuring the continuity of activity. Clotilde De Gastines, 'La conversion libérale de Jacques Lemaigre Dubreuil au Maroc (1950–1955)', *Outre-Mers: Revue d'Histoire*, 364 (2009), p.346.