War Damage and Problems of Reconstruction in France, 1940-1945

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GEORGE W. KYTE

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The German armies and air forces inflicted considerable damage upon France during their successful offensive in the spring and summer of 1940. The damage grew more extensive each year thereafter because of systematic German looting and Anglo-American aerial bombardment. Then, on June 6, 1944, the armies of the Western Allies landed in Normandy and commenced to fight their way across France into the Hitler Reich. The German armies resisted furiously, and countless towns and villages were destroyed in the battles which ensued. Unfortunately for France, the invasion which liberated her brought about more destruction than she had suffered during the victorious onslaught of Hitler's armies in 1940.

Many cities, such as Brest, Caen, Dunkerque, Falaise, and St. Lô were almost completely destroyed. Hundreds of towns, villages, and farms suffered the same fate. All told, over 1,200,000 buildings were demolished or sustained major damage, and more than 1,000,000 people were made homeless. Several thousand kilometers of mainline railroad track were torn up, 2,300 railroad bridges were destroyed, and France lost about half of the railroad cars and nearly 80 per cent of the locomotives which she had possessed in 1939. Tremendous damage was inflicted upon industrial plants. Many thousands of acres of the best arable land were rendered unproductive because of the

* A paper read before the San Francisco Bay Area meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association at Stanford University, January 19, 1946. [Editor]

1 Federal Communications Commission digest of an article in the Swiss Neue Zürcher Zeitung for March 25, 1945, summarizing a speech made by Professor André Siegfried. The Federal Communications Commission will henceforth be referred to as FCC. The Office of War Information will be designated as OWI.

2 FCC digest of article in Neue Zürcher Zeitung for March 25, 1945.
plans for reconstruction in the fall of 1944. General de Gaulle appointed Raoul Dautry, on November 13, 1944, to head the Ministry of Reconstruction and Town Planning (Ministère de la Réconstruction et de l'Urbanisme). Dautry had been chief engineer of the Chemin de Fer du Nord for a number of years. He was in charge of the state railway system from 1928 to 1937. He served as minister of armaments in 1939–1940, and he was one of the few members of M. Daladier’s ministry who was considered free of blame for the military disasters of 1940.

The plans which were made for the rebuilding of France called for the expenditure of more than twenty billion dollars over a period of more than twenty years. Permanent repairs and construction were not to be attempted until 1947 or later. In the few years from the fall of 1944 to the end of 1947, only certain basic or high-priority repairs were to be made. Basic repairs were to include the restoration of the lines of transportation and communication, the resumption of full production in the coal mines, and the construction or acquisition of temporary housing units. Debris was to be cleared from devastated cities as quickly as bulldozers and other heavy equipment could be made available. German labor and materials were to be used to a maximum extent in carrying out the program.

Dautry’s estimate of completing the basic repairs by 1947 turned out to be too optimistic. Reconstruction efforts were already far behind schedule by the middle of 1945. The European phase of World War II lasted longer than Dautry had expected, and the Germans managed to hold a number of the principal French seaports right up to VE-Day. Lack of adequate seaports and shipping prevented the United States and the United Kingdom from supplying France with food, machinery, and construction equipment. The French themselves lacked adequate machinery and equipment. They also lacked engineers and construction workers because many of them were serving in the armed forces or were in captivity in Germany.

The primary cause of delay, however, was probably the sheer destructiveness of modern weapons and demolition equipment. So much damage had been done that it was impossible to repair even a small part of it in two or three

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31 Ibid.
32 General de Gaulle appointed Dautry to his present post in the cabinet only after an investigation of his war record. De Gaulle considered Dautry’s program for rearming and reequipping the French military forces to have been an excellent one. The program was a failure because of the extreme lack of time in which to carry it out and because of interference by Daladier and General Gamelin.
33 FCC monitoring of an official broadcast from Radio Paris, May 2, 1945. The broadcast summarized a press conference at which Dautry had discussed the plans for reconstruction which had been drawn up by his staff of specialists.
34 Ibid. Some of the details of the plans for basic repairs are contained in the parliamentary debates appearing in France, Journal Officiel, Débats, March 3 and 6, 1945.
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presence of land mines. The mines, which had been planted in French soil by the millions, continued to take a heavy toll of lives long after the cessation of hostilities.

French casualties from 1939 to 1945 included nearly 200,000 men killed and 250,000 seriously wounded, in the armed forces. An additional 150,000 persons were killed in France by German reprisals and Anglo-American aerial bombardment. As many as 300,000 men and women died in captivity in Germany, while another 250,000 of their countrymen returned to France as invalids suffering from typhus, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and other dread diseases. Malnutrition, a breakdown of sanitary facilities, and a shortage of doctors and medicine resulted in deterioration of the health of the French people, particularly those who lived in large cities. Tuberculosis, pneumonia, and syphilis are believed to have become more widespread in France during the war than ever before in modern times.

The destruction and suffering in France was so great that many American servicemen who witnessed it were appalled by it. One American soldier, shocked at what he saw, wrote:

Never have I seen so much destruction. It is discouraging to see all the wreckage. Whole towns and countrysides are devastated. In some towns, like St. Die, the Germans mined all the houses, blew them into the streets, and set them on fire. In the outlying districts, they destroyed all the farm buildings. . . . It will take many years to clear away the wreckage, rebuild all this, and get back to anything like normal life.

Another American soldier recorded his impression of economic conditions in Paris during the winter of 1944–1945 in the following words:

There is no coal or firewood here and we have to bundle up with layer upon layer of clothing to keep warm. . . . [The French] don’t have adequate clothing. They don’t even have enough food. Their ration allowances are pitiful. . . . Those who can’t afford to buy on the black market are in danger of starving to death. Many people are so badly off that they will sell themselves, steal, or swindle to get . . . a pack of cigarettes or some of our field rations. Many of the French are . . . underweight. . . . I suspect that their health must be undermined and I wait fearfully for some kind of epidemic to break out.

The war damage was so great and the means which were available for reconstruction were so limited that the French might have been excused for giving away to despair. They did not falter, however, but commenced to draw up

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* Ibid.
* FCC monitoring of an official broadcast from Radio Paris, August 4, 1945.
* Ibid.
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Dautry's estimate of completing the basic repairs by 1947 turned out to be too optimistic. Reconstruction efforts were already far behind schedule by the middle of 1945. The European phase of World War II lasted longer than Dautry had expected, and the Germans managed to hold a number of the principal French seaports right up to VE-Day. Lack of adequate seaports and shipping prevented the United States and the United Kingdom from supplying France with food, machinery, and construction equipment. The French themselves lacked adequate machinery and equipment. They also lacked engineers and construction workers because many of them were serving in the armed forces or were in captivity in Germany.

The primary cause of delay, however, was probably the sheer destructiveness of modern weapons and demolition equipment. So much damage had been done that it was impossible to repair even a small part of it in two or three
years. Battle damage alone had been immense. German demolition engineers added further damage through their systematic destruction of harbor facilities, bridges, railroads, telegraph lines, factories, and other vital installations. They carried their diabolic skill to a state of perfection probably never before witnessed in modern warfare.

A lone example of the destruction wrought by German demolition experts should suffice to illustrate the magnitude of the problem which their efforts created for the French. The German armies lost the city of Bordeaux in the late summer of 1944 before they had time to sabotage its port facilities. They blockaded Bordeaux, however, by holding fortifications at the mouth of the Gironde, and they rendered the channel of the Gironde impassable by filling it with explosive charges and sunken ships. The sunken ships were filled with concrete and their sides were blown out so that they could not be raised. Mines were attached to their hulls so that any divers who tried to carry out salvage operations would be killed. The French were unable to open a passage through the jumble of sunken ships until April 21, 1945, and there is still much work to be done before the channel is really safe for shipping. The other barrier to navigation in the Gironde, the German fortifications at the mouth of the river, was put out of action by General de Larminat's French Forces of the Interior on April 17 after an assault which climaxed an eight-month siege.

The garrisoning or destruction of seaports was one of the most brilliant and telling moves made by the Germans in the closing months of the war. Several harbors, including Toulon, Brest, and Dunkerque, were even more badly blocked or damaged than was Bordeaux. It is thought that it will be impossible to restore some of them to full operation before 1948. St. Nazaire, La Rochelle, Rochefort, Nantes, and the approaches to Bordeaux were not even in French hands until April and early May, 1945. A German garrison held the port of Brest until it was terribly damaged during a long and bloody attack made by the American troops who captured it. Dunkerque, which was held by a German garrison against a powerful force of Canadians and Czechs, was found to be almost completely destroyed after its surrender on VE-Day. Even at Marseilles and Toulon, where the Germans had failed to carry out some of their planned demolitions, damage was found to be severe. The inland port of Strasbourg was blocked, in its turn, by floating mines and wrecked bridges. The closing of so many ports nearly paralyzed the efforts of the French to re-

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19 OWI press summary on France, April 22, 1945.
20 Ibid.
21 Paris France-Libre, November 2, 1944, p. 1, cols. 4-5; and Paris Presse, April 11, 1945, p. 1, cols. 4-5, p. 2, cols. 1-2, contain articles on damage at Toulon. See also French Press and Information Service. Citizens of Toulon Rebuild Their City, New York, April 14, 1945, p. 1. Information on the restoration and use of the port of Marseilles is given in the article “Marseilles: Staging Area for the Moving Americans,” Newsweek, June 11, 1945, p. 54.
build their country. Such ports as were open for use were needed for the supply of General Eisenhower’s armies, so it was impossible to bring civilian commodities into France until additional ports were repaired or were captured from the Germans.

 Destruction of railroad and road bridges created a problem almost as serious as that created by the loss of harbor facilities. German demolition crews systematically destroyed such bridges as were left intact by Anglo-American aerial bombing. Over 3,000 road bridges and 2,900 railroad bridges were destroyed or suffered major damage.⁹ All the bridges across the Loire from Nevers to the sea, a distance of about 500 kilometers, were destroyed or lost one or more spans. All the bridges over the Seine, except those in Paris, were destroyed for a distance of several hundred kilometers.¹⁰ Some of the damaged bridges suffered only the dropping of a span or two, a type of damage with which engineers can cope rather easily. Many of the bridges were more badly damaged, however. German demolition experts blew them up in such a manner that their spans were hopelessly shattered and twisted. In such instances, the engineers had no choice but to clear away the wreckage and build new bridges.

 French rail and road systems were paralyzed for months after the liberating armies of General Eisenhower had driven the main German field armies from French soil. Military engineers restored the railroads and roads needed as supply lines for the advancing Allied armies, but responsibility for the repair of shattered bridges and railroads which were not needed for military purposes was delegated to the French. It might just as well have been delegated to the Zulus. The French did not have the machinery and materials to carry out the necessary repairs, and it took them until the summer of 1945 to complete temporary spans along some of their most important railroad lines.¹¹ Even as late as June 2, 1945, it was possible for an American soldier to write: “There has been no reconstruction to speak of. All destroyed bridges are still out or else they are replaced by temporary spans. Temporary bridges have been built by the Yanks rather than by the French themselves.”¹²

 Paralysis of the ports, railroads, and roads of France made it impossible to revive commerce or industry during the years 1944–1945. Coal and raw materials could not be delivered to the factories.¹³ Surpluses of food could not be delivered from the farms to the cities. Unemployment became widespread, and

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¹⁰ The source for the statements on the destruction of bridges is the file of information maintained by A-2 (Intelligence) branch of the United States Army Air Forces at their headquarters in Washington, D.C.
¹¹ Paris Front National, May 19, 1945, p. 1, col. 6; and Grenoble Travailleurs Alpins, June 25, 1945, p. 1, cols. 3-4.
¹³ FCC monitoring of Radio Brazzaville, August 2, 1945.
general economic collapse threatened as prices grew steadily higher. Black-marketeering became a standard business procedure, and gangs of American deserters and French criminals made a big business of the sale of gasoline, cigarettes, food, and other items stolen from military supplies.24

Problems which resulted from the breakdown of transportation were hardly more serious than those created by the shortage of coal for industrial power and heating. France produced about 45,000,000 tons of coal annually before the war.25 She imported nearly 25,000,000 tons each year, mainly from Germany and the United Kingdom, in order to make up deficits in her own production.26 In 1944, however, only about 2,000,000 tons of coal were extracted from the mines monthly. Total production for 1944 was just about half of that for the prewar year 1938 or 1939. Even as late as March, 1945, the rate of production was still below 3,000,000 tons a month despite every effort to restore the coal mines to prewar standards.27 The deficit in production could not be made up through imports, because transportation had collapsed or was tied up by military needs.

Supplies of coal became so short that the French National Railroads had a reserve of coal sufficient for only five days' operation during part of the spring of 1945.28 Electric power stations, textile mills, sugar refineries, and other important plants and installations were almost forced to suspend operations. General de Gaulle saved them from closing by transferring to their use coal reserves which had been previously allocated for the use of defense industries.29

Adequate heating of French homes, offices, and factories became impossible because of the lack of coal. Insufficient heating would have been a serious handicap even had the winter of 1944-1945 been a mild one, but, as it happened, the winter was unusually cold. Water pipes burst in hundreds of buildings, and many thousands of people suffered from influenza or long series of colds. The winter weather was so severe that the canals were frozen for weeks at a time, preventing delivery to Paris of the small quantities of coal which were allocated for heating purposes.30

No solution for the problem created by the shortage of coal was possible until Germany was defeated. France could not produce the quantities of coal which she needed because mining machinery had been sabotaged or carried off by the Germans. Many of the best coal miners were prisoners or slave laborers in Germany. The United States and the United Kingdom could not export

26 Paris L'Ordre, July 6, 1945, p. 1, cols. 3-4. The article summarizes an important speech made at Lille by M. Lacoste, minister of industrial production.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
coal to France because shipping and harbor facilities were unavailable. German coal could not be removed from the Ruhr or the Saar because of the damage which had been done to the railroads, canals, and river lines by the blowing up of bridges.

The coal shortage remained acute until the fall of 1945. By that time, vigorous efforts which had been made to remedy the situation began to bring results. French coal production reached 83 per cent of the 1938 rate by the end of September, 1945. Large quantities of German coal began to flow into France at about the same time. The arrival of the German coal had been made possible by repairs made by military engineers along the principal railroad lines and canals leading from the Ruhr to the vicinity of Paris. Additional quantities of coal, amounting to at least 400,000 tons monthly, were shipped to France from the United States and the United Kingdom under terms of lend-lease agreements.

French industrial production suffered, as we have learned, from a lack of raw materials and an insufficient supply of coal. It also suffered because whole factories and industrial districts were destroyed or damaged during the war. Many industrial plants were blasted by Anglo-American aerial bombing, while many others were sabotaged or dismantled by the retreating armies. The damage to the famous Le Creusot works alone was so immense that M. Dautry has estimated that it will take $70,000,000, and 750,000 tons of materials and five or more years to rebuild them.

Agricultural production has also suffered, although it has not fallen off as much as has industrial production. Agriculture has been affected adversely by such factors as the loss of farm laborers and machinery, a shortage of commercial fertilizers, and the planting of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines in arable land. The most troublesome of the several factors is probably that of the mines, of which there are an estimated 100,000,000 planted in French soil. Their presence has put more than 100,000 acres of arable land out of production. Scores of farmers and hundreds of head of livestock have already been killed by exploding mines, and the death toll is mounting steadily.

A direction de déminage was established in the Ministry of Reconstruction and Town Planning by a law of February 21, 1945. Thousands of military

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31 Ibid., October 2, 1945.
32 Ibid., September 20, 1945.
33 Ibid., August 6, 1945. The broadcast quoted René Pleven, minister of finance, as stating that the United States alone had pledged to supply France with 400,000 tons of coal monthly. No figures were given for such coal supplies as may have been pledged by the United Kingdom.
36 Ibid.
personnel and prisoners of war were employed in the clearing away of mines. Despite all efforts, only 3,500,000 mines had been removed by June 20, 1945, leaving an estimated 96,500,000 to be accounted for. Some 756 men gave their lives in removing the first 1,000,000 mines and 100,000 tons of ammunition from French soil. M. Dautry has been very unhappy about the expenditure of French lives and has asked for the use of 100,000 German prisoners to carry out demining operations under the supervision of French engineers. At the present rate of removal, it will take ten or more years and many thousands of lives before French soil is again free of the menace of hidden land mines.

Most of the mines in France were planted by the Germans along the seacoast, in front of inland defense lines, or along the shoulders of roads. However, scattered mines were placed wherever individual German soldiers thought that they might be most likely to remain undetected until they had performed their deadly missions. Few places in France can be regarded as being completely free of hidden explosive charges. That is true even in areas in which mine-removal operations have been carried out. Late in April, 1945, some farmers who lived in a small town on the Riviera, put the success of demining operations to the test by driving herds of sheep onto a beach which was supposed to have been cleared of mines. Sixteen of the sheep were killed by exploding mines after they had been pastured in the “demined” area for less than two days.

The explosives which the German armies left behind them in France have taken many lives and will undoubtedly take many more, but they are probably less menacing to the lives and health of the people than the effect of the captivity of 2,400,000 men and women in Germany. The Germans took 1,800,000 French soldiers as prisoners of war in 1940. They permitted some of the prisoners to return to France, but they insisted that each returning prisoner should be replaced by a “volunteer” worker. They retained in Germany at least 750,000 prisoners and 220,000 ex-prisoners who had been transferred to the status of “voluntary” workers. Thus, France was deprived of the services of nearly 1,000,000 of her finest men from the time of their capture in 1940 until the collapse of German resistance in 1945.

During the years from 1940 to 1945, the Germans added hundreds of thousands of “voluntary” workers—in reality, slave laborers—to the number of Frenchmen whom they held in Germany. In addition, the Germans took

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40 FCC monitoring of official broadcast from Radio Paris, June 20, 1945.
41 Ibid., May 2, 1945.
42 Ibid., August 5, 1945.
43 Paris Le Parisien Libéré, February 16, 1945, p. 1, col. 5.
WAR DAMAGE AND RECONSTRUCTION IN FRANCE

from France several hundred thousand political and “racial” prisoners. The “racial” prisoners, about 115,000 in number, were selected for murder, and very few of them succeeded in escaping the fate which their captors had willed for them. Alsatians and Lorrainers were placed in a special category. They were regarded as German nationals and were subjected to military or labor service in Germany’s behalf. Many of them died at such places as Stalingrad and Kharkov while fighting as soldiers of the Reich. It is probable that most of them were very unwilling defenders of the Reich, but that did not serve to stop sub-zero weather or Soviet bullets from killing them.

Frenchmen who were imprisoned or forced to labor in Germany may have numbered as many as 3,000,000, although there were never more than 2,400,000 of them in German hands at any one time. Some 300,000 of the prisoners and slave laborers failed to return to France at the end of the war. The missing 300,000 were mainly the political and “racial” prisoners. They died at places such as Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau, where the Nazis had developed assembly-line methods of murder to a high state of efficiency.

No one knows how badly the health and minds of men who spent four or five years in prison or in work camps in Germany may have been affected. Few French medical men and psychologists are very optimistic about the condition of the returnees. A doctor of medicine from Strasbourg, who had been interned for a time at Buchenwald, has warned his countrymen that many of the returnees will have to be treated as malades or even as grandes malades. Considerable numbers of them are infected with typhus and tuberculosis, and many others are suffering from mental ills brought on by their terrible experiences. A doctor of medicine from Paris has stated that many of the returnees who are not suffering from a major illness are, nevertheless, permanently weakened in body and in mind and may become public charges within the next few years.

The weakened state of health of returning prisoners and deportees will hamper the plans for reconstruction by depriving France of needed workers. It will be necessary to use German prisoners of war to replace them, although it is well understood that German prisoners will be something less than efficient in carrying out the rebuilding of France. Many prisoners are already

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45 Ibid. The figures given may be too high. They were made public by Henri Frenay, minister of prisoners and deportees. Frenay revised his estimates both upward and downward from time to time. One of his estimates, broadcast over Radio Paris on July 16, 1945, allowed for no more than 2,400,000 Frenchmen in Germany from 1940 to 1945 inclusive, with no more than 1,800,000 of them in the Reich at any one time. By July 1, 1945, 1,490,843 Frenchmen had been repatriated from Germany, but others were still awaiting repatriation at that time.
48 FCC monitoring of an official broadcast from Radio Paris, July 11, 1945. The broadcast quoted the opinions of Dr. F. Bonnet-Roy, an occasional contributor to the pages of the Paris daily paper Le Monde.
working in France, and they will probably be joined by 1,000,000 or more of their countrymen before the summer of 1946.  

All the problems of reconstruction, when lumped together, seem to add up to a hopeless situation. The damage is so widespread, the means available for reconstruction so limited, and the wage and price structure in such disorder that it would appear that France can never be rebuilt. However, the French are prepared to make the necessary expenditures of money and energy to do the job. The United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and other nations are helping with exports of machine tools, locomotives, lumber, medical supplies, and other vital materials. Germany is paying reparations, principally in the form of labor performed by prisoners of war, but partly in the form of machinery, airplanes, rolling stock, and agricultural produce confiscated by French occupational forces.  

A start has already been made in carrying out the reconstruction of France. Many of the ports, railroad lines, and roads have been reopened to traffic, and the battle to bring coal production up to prewar levels is almost won. Nevertheless, the major part of the job of reconstruction still lies ahead. Work is already behind schedule, and many problems remain to be solved before the preliminary goal of clearing up the wreckage and restoring the transportation lines by 1947 is reached. The French are not dismayed by the difficulties, however. They have sometimes been at their greatest heights of brilliance and constructiveness after a defeat or disaster. Their recovery may be more rapid and more complete than any man now living or traveling in France can possibly foresee.  

It is to be hoped that the efforts of the French to reconstruct their country will not be rendered useless by the outbreak of another major war. Shattered bridges and buildings may be rebuilt, but the cumulative effects of two major conflicts in less than thirty years will probably have an adverse effect upon French economy for generations to come. Neither France nor the world can afford to have another war, especially if that war should be waged with superdestructive atomic missiles.

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60 FCC monitoring of an official broadcast from Radio Paris, July 17, 1945. The broadcast quoted statistics on prisoner labor which were made public by Edouard Maillet, director-general for manpower in the Ministry of Labor. All told, France will employ 1,750,000 German prisoners, of whom only about 215,000 were actually at work in France by July 15, 1945.  

50 Paris Retour (weekly), June 13–19, 1945, p. 2, col. 4; and FCC monitoring of an official broadcast from Radio Paris, August 4, 1945. Since the Reich was shattered almost beyond hope of repair during the war, its capacity to pay reparations was limited mainly to the contribution of labor from the ranks of its conquered armies. However, the French seized such machinery and materials as they could find still intact in Germany. They acquired, for example, 400 Junker transport planes, which they will use on their commercial airlines until new and faster planes can be built in French factories to replace them.