Denunciations, Community Outsiders, and Material Shortages in Vichy France

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On 1 January 1942, Marshal Philippe Pétain addressed the French nation in his annual New Year's message. Coming shortly after the United States' entry into the Second World War, Pétain's message reminded the country of its traditional strengths and reiterated the need for national unity as the war continued. But as the French entered their second winter under German occupation, many obstacles stood in the way of unity. The country was divided into two major zones, tensions ran high between urban consumers and rural producers, authorities and the law singled out foreign "undesirables" and Jews for repressive measures, and collaborators and resisters each solidified their positions. Vichy's attempts at creating a new moral order through the National Revolution had so far failed to produce the desired unity. For most French men and women, the most important concern in their lives was feeding and clothing their families, and they would employ almost any means to meet these needs. The black and gray markets thrived, and denunciation became a widely employed tool in the attempt to gain some material advantage over one's neighbors and acquaintances. In his New Year's address, Pétain called black marketeers and people who resorted to slanderous denunciations "adversaries to French unity" and labeled such individuals
"deserters" and "enemies of the National Revolution."¹ For the next two years, the government would try to fight false and anonymous denunciations while encouraging truthful, signed accusations, both in the name of national unity. It was a distinction that ultimately failed but that caused much damage in the process, especially for community outsiders.

The examination of denunciations during the Vichy era provides particular insight into the ways the government's ideologies and the realities of daily life interacted. The connections between denunciations, the status of refugees, and concerns about material shortages became central to political and personal life. While false denunciations undermined Vichy's moral agenda, the denunciation of foreign and/or Jewish refugees furthered the regime's political agenda. The use of denunciation in an environment so strongly characterized by the distinction between natives and foreigners also added to the social and economic isolation of outsiders. The extreme shortages of the period represented the primary concern of the average French resident, however. Hopes of improving a material situation often underlay denunciations; therefore, any examination of the phenomenon must recognize the relationship between the material and the ideological. An examination of the daily lives of men and women in the Limousin during the war reveals diverse motivating factors as well as the serious consequences of anonymous and signed denunciations for those on the margins of society.

The area around Limoges in central France—also known as the Limousin—provides an especially rich area for the study of the ways in which denunciations affected outsiders

as well as the relationship between Vichy's ideology and shortages. In September 1939 the government of the Third Republic evacuated 380,000 people from the border regions of Alsace and Lorraine to the French interior, including the Limoges region, in preparation for a possible German invasion. When the invasion actually began in May 1940, millions of other residents from northern France fled to southern, rural regions such as the Limousin for safety. After the armistice, the region fell just south of the line of demarcation in the southern unoccupied zone, making it a desirable destination throughout the war for French and foreign Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. The hostilities thus forced different social, cultural, and religious groups to interact–often for the first time–during a period in which outsiders were increasingly excluded from the French nation.

In addition to the advantages of being in the so-called "free" zone, the Limousin was a predominantly rural area that remained relatively privileged compared to other French regions in terms of food supply. After years of denigrating the Limousin as impoverished and backward, outsiders now turned to the people of the region for the richness of its food production. As official efforts at the equitable distribution of material goods through rationing failed to fulfill the needs and expectations of populations throughout the Limousin, people turned to other means of procuring additional goods. The worsening material situation forced families to develop their own survival strategies, which often broke the law and contradicted the moral ideals represented by the National Revolution.

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Denunciations were one such strategy.

During the Vichy era, French residents sent between three and five million denunciation letters. Civilians sent denunciations to everyone from local officials and law enforcement bureaus to national agencies and individuals such as the General Commissariat for Jewish Questions or even Marshal Pétain himself. Natives of the Limousin denounced newly arrived refugees, while some refugees denounced Limousins or other refugees; long-time neighbors denounced each other; and non-Jewish French men and women denounced "undesirable" Jews. Motivated by material gain, ideological commitment, self-preservation, or petty differences, residents of the region picked up their pens and regularly informed the government of their neighbors' and acquaintances' immorality and misdeeds. Individual willingness to resort to denunciations created an atmosphere in which officials noted that "Few people dare to talk. One has a tendency to see in his neighbor a possible denouncer." While denunciations could provide information on food or "racial" infractions that were admittedly difficult to police, they also created an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that opposed the ideals of the National Revolution. Rather than building a stronger community through the purge of harmful elements such as black marketeers, hoarders, and

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3 This figure includes both signed and unsigned letters. See André Halimi, La Délation sous l'Occupation (Paris: Editions Alain Moreau, 1983), 7. There is no centralized collection of denunciations, which makes a complete overview of the phenomenon impossible. Furthermore, denunciations were also communicated orally in person to various officials or by telephone.

cultural outsiders, denunciations encouraged lying, dissimulation, and self-interested actions.

The examination of denunciations during the Vichy era also provides particular insight into the complex interplay between the government's ideologies and the realities of daily life. Contradictions immediately become apparent: first, local and national figures encouraged truthful, signed denunciations, cultivated informants, and monitored mail and phone conversations, yet they discouraged anonymous letters providing potentially-useful information because they threatened national unity. Second, through their denunciations, French residents sustained and legitimated the government's intrusion into personal lives, but anonymous or false accusations simultaneously undermined Vichy's moral agenda. Third, although the tenets of the National Revolution deplored selfishness, egotism, and individualism, denunciations provided individuals with a powerful tool for harming others and benefitting themselves. Finally, rather than creating stronger community bonds, the fear of denunciation appeared increasingly to isolate French men and women from each other. This fear led individuals to censor their thoughts, words, and actions, which allowed the Vichy regime to function with the belief that the population did not oppose the government. Instead of openly expressing their opinions, French residents intentionally acted to deceive their government, thereby creating a challenge to the regime's authority.

The tension between "legitimate" and false denunciations existed in previous political periods, and the French language itself reflects the difference. The French term dénonciation carries a fairly neutral connotation associated with exposing a fact, while délation has a negative nuance suggesting self-interest and the intent to
harm another. In practice, the general public and historians use the terms interchangeably with a decidedly negative undertone. Vichy attempted to uphold the distinction between the two words, but to little avail. During the Vichy era, national and local attitudes towards denunciation and informing were complicated. Gendarmes regularly investigated allegations related to rationing infractions from "a person known to us, trustworthy, and desiring to keep..."

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6 This was not the first time the distinction failed. Colin Lucas has shown the inability of the Revolutionary government at the end of the eighteenth century to distinguish effectively between the two. In the attempt to prevent calumny, societal discord, and acts of revenge the defenders of democracy in the French Revolution insisted that denunciations be made in public. Such public declarations, including signing one's name to accusations, would guarantee that individuals acted in the best interests of the People and the Republic rather than from base motivations. Under the Terror, the two terms and acts became indistinguishable; the difference between virtuous and contemptible denunciations ceased to exist. See Lucas, 29, 31-34.
their anonymity," in other words, denunciations. Such actions remained consistent with the national mandate to combat profiteering and the black market and ostensibly helped assure the equal distribution of goods. Writers in the collaborationist press advocated "responsible" denunciation as a duty, and public denunciation was deemed appropriate when it furthered the well being of the French State and was even institutionalized in certain cases such as the pursuit of Jews and resisters.

In contrast, various government officials discouraged informing and its self-interested motivations. In 1941, the mayor of Guéret (the administrative capital of the Creuse) published a notice in the local paper alerting residents to the fact that he "cannot take into any account letters that do not reveal the identity of their authors." Authorities would investigate and respond to accusations in signed letters, however. A month later, the prefect of the Creuse and the Military Commandant for the department echoed the mayor's announcement. Calling anonymous letters "intolerable" and their authors "cowards," the officials declared that the authors, not the accused, would be the object of prosecution. The day after Pétain's 1942 New Year's address, the Minister of the Interior sent a circular to the prefects of the free zone regarding anonymous letters and slanderous denunciations. Citing the growing number of false denunciations that created an atmosphere of suspicion and malaise contrary to the recovery of France, Pierre Pucheu enjoined prefects to employ "energetic"

\footnote{SHGN Boîte 12702 - Haute-Vienne, BT Limoges. Procès-verbal number 1048 (5 June 1941). See also SHGN Boîte 12701 - Haute-Vienne, BT Limoges. Procès-verbal number 368 (22 Feb. 1941).}

\footnote{Le Courrier de la Creuse, number 5, 2 Feb. 1941, 2.}

\footnote{Ibid., "Lettres anonymes," number 6, 6 March 1941, 1.}
measures to put an end to the letters.\textsuperscript{10}

An examination of the daily lives of men and women in the Limousin during the war reveals diverse motivating factors and the serious consequences of anonymous and signed denunciations. Though Limousins wielded denunciations as a weapon against French and foreign residents alike, for people on the margins of society, including refugees and Jews, denunciations had particular economic, social, and survival implications. As strangers in communities, refugees faced both material difficulties and close supervision as a result of their outsider status. Some refugees found it difficult to buy rare items because vendors and peasants, afraid of sanctions or denunciation, found it prudent to sell items under the table only to known and trusted persons. René Limouzin, a thirteen-year-old boy living on his grandparents' farm in the northern Corrèze during the war, regularly went in search of supplies for his family, which included a refugee aunt and uncle from Paris and his demobilized father. In his memoirs, Limouzin recalls asking a grocer for a kilogram of sugar. After receiving a suspicious look from the man behind the counter, René was told there was no more sugar despite the fact that the client in front of him had just left with at least two kilograms. Limouzin believed that the reason for the difference was "she was a regular client and I was not."\textsuperscript{11}

Local officials also subjected refugees to close observation and the newly arrived—and therefore suspect—population formed a separate category in reports concerning the population's overall attitude. The combination of suspicion


\textsuperscript{11} René Limouzin, \textit{Une Adolescence paysanne pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale} (Naves: Editions de La Veytizou, 1996), 44.

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and close observation on the part of both officials and individuals contributed to the vulnerability of refugees. Vichy's xenophobic and antisemitic program threatened foreign and Jewish refugees even more.

The 1930s and the Second World War greatly tested France's reputation as a country accepting of immigrants and as a place of asylum. The active recruitment of foreign labor to replace losses after World War I gave way to increasing restrictions after major waves of immigration in the years following Hitler's rise to power in Germany. The government's revocation of naturalizations, the labeling of certain foreigners as "undesirables," the internment of the so-called undesirables, the conscription of foreign men into forced labor within France, and the eventual deportation of foreign Jews to death camps in Poland reflected Vichy's "France for the French" ideal. Ordinary citizens also expressed xenophobic sentiments, and local officials in the Limousin noted: "The Public is not very happy to see all these foreigners among the French and one hears it said that they are the ones who sold out France." The pre-war internment camps designed to hold refugees from the Spanish Civil War later served as places of detention for German nationals and other foreigners deemed dangerous to the public order. Required to carry

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and regularly renew special identity cards, foreigners were subject to random controls for merely "appearing foreign." In order to aid official surveillance, the government also restricted foreigners' travel and even forced some individuals and families to live in assigned residences. Denunciations increased the potential for sanctions or internment, making restrictive government policies even more threatening.

The subject of refugee allocations illustrates just one conflict over material issues that could lead to denunciations and serious consequences for outsiders. In September 1941, the Gendarmerie Nationale in Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat (Haute-Vienne) investigated the financial situation of five French refugee families from the Occupied Zone. In all five cases, the government had ended the families' refugee allocation because it believed the families had adequate financial resources and did not need additional aid from the French State. Each head of the household asserted during the interviews that he was the victim of "false allegations," "false denunciations," or "erroneous information" regarding the state of his finances. The accusations, regardless of their validity, affected the families' well being. Without the money from the government, the fathers complained that they could not

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15 See for example SHGN Boîte 12706 - Haute-Vienne, BT Limoges. Procès-verbal number 1744 (12 Aug. 1942). Gendarmes in Limoges stopped "an individual appearing foreign" and discovered he was a Polish Jew who had fled Paris to avoid arrest by the Germans. Without the proper paperwork or permission to enter the Free Zone, the Rabbi was "invited" to join a foreign labor battalion. The renewal of work permits and identity cards could cost around 400 francs for each renewal. See Guillaume, "Du Bon usage."

16 SHGN Boîte 12753–Haute-Vienne, Section de Limoges, Brigade de Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat. Procès-verbal number 418 (10 Sept. 1941).
afford to house, clothe, or feed their dependents. The gendarmes, in consultation with the mayor of the town, came to the conclusion that in all but one instance the men and their families lived modestly and were in all likelihood without substantial personal resources. Officials determined that at least one family was in need of continued state support, and the mayor requested the reinstatement of its allocations.

While the gendarmes' report reveals neither the source of the false allegations nor the motivations for such assertions, the wartime conditions in the region provide several possible explanations. At a time when labor on farms in the Limousin was in short supply due to the number of rural prisoners of war, the visibility of inactive males created resentment. Some believed that the allocations actually discouraged refugees from looking for a job and contributing to the well being of the community and the country. Even without an occupation, the refugee families still had a means of income, and, perhaps more importantly, they had the free time necessary to procure food. Instead of spending the daytime hours on the farm or in factories, they could wait in lines outside shops for their rations or search the surrounding countryside for additional food. Perhaps feelings of inequality and bitterness on the part of employed natives of the region served as the motivation for a denunciation. The mayor of Saint-Léonard, while acknowledging that he did not know the individuals in question well enough to speak to their personal wealth, felt that the families were not in a dire situation. "No member of these families is engaged in any occupation," remarked the mayor; "if they were really in need, they would have looked for work."17 Several of the

17 Ibid.
refugees complained that despite their best efforts, they were unable to find a job in the town. But to the on-looker, it seemed that the jobless refugees had to be wealthy and leading a life of ease, a situation that created jealousies in light of the difficulties of the war.

Other anonymous denouncers explicitly revealed the material motivation behind their accusations. In 1941, a woman approached gendarmes patrolling the Boulevard Louis-Blanc in Limoges to inform them of a Belgian refugee's dishonest provisioning activities. The denouncer, a person known to the gendarmes but wishing to keep her anonymity, provided the law enforcement officials with the woman's maiden and married names, address, and possible alias. The "trustworthy" source alleged that the Belgian woman, Madame P., was using a milk card and a food card in her daughter's name although the daughter did not live in Limoges with her mother. Two days later the gendarmes received an anonymous letter about the same refugee which asserted that Madame P. received both a refugee allocation and a military allocation to which she was not entitled. Madame P.'s access to additional ration tickets and increased income to purchase goods prompted the denunciations.

Yet accepting denunciations at face value flattens the complexity of the issue. The archival traces of denunciations leave little information on the range of possible motives that prompted an individual to turn in a friend, neighbor, or acquaintance. Officials in the Limousin recommended an investigation into the causes of the population's "malaise" and "unhappiness" in order to "attenuate in some measure the vengeful spirit and

18 SHGN Boîte 12702–Haute-Vienne, BT Limoges. Procès-verbal number 1048 (5 June 1941).
anonymous denunciations that are raging with a pronounced upsurge.¹⁹ Letter writers themselves cited infractions of the supply laws as the reason for providing information to the authorities. However, the reporting of illicit food activities could mask personal disputes. Reports also fail to provide the true motivation for reporting violations. Some individuals reported others out of a sense of duty to the nation and its commitment to regenerating society, while others hoped to remove competition for scarce goods or wanted a more equal distribution of materials. In many cases, a combination of ideological and material factors played a role in encouraging denunciations.

The specific example of denunciations of Jewish refugees in the Limousin provides some insight into the interplay between ideology and physical need as motivating factors. Under Vichy in the Limousin, the "Jewish Question" conflated xenophobia and antisemitism as many Jewish refugees were of foreign origin. Most inhabitants of the Limoges region claimed never to have met or even to have seen a Jew before the war began in 1939. The city of Limoges had a pre-war Jewish population of 161, but by the summer of 1941 the situation had changed and officials reported 2,510 Jewish refugees in the region.²⁰ Vichy's first


²⁰ See ADHV 993 W 221–Mesures gouvernementales prises à l'encontre des Juifs for pre-war statistics. For the number of refugees in June 1941 see ADHV 187 W–190–Etats numériques par commune des réfugiés israélites secourus et non secourus. As of 15 Sept. 1941, the General Secretary for the National Police reported to the General Commissariat for Jewish Questions that there were 1,122 Jews (French and foreign) in the Creuse and 4,551 (French and foreign) in the Haute-
Jewish Statutes promulgated on 3 October 1940, the result of French antisemitism and not Nazi imposition, demonstrated the regime's commitment to purging society of Jewish influences. Denunciations particularly threatened foreign Jews as the objects of harsh measures intended to marginalize and even expel them from French society. Measures passed in 1938 relative to "certain foreign undesirables" already subjected many foreign Jews to possible internment in "special" camps. Various laws related specifically to Jews tightened controls over the course of the years 1940-1944 and made clear distinctions between French and foreign Jews, especially in the realm of deportation from France.

Jews faced greater risks than other foreigners because the Vichy government specifically targeted them as a national "enemy" and because the structural administration created by the regime for the supervision of Jews provided denouncers with an additional outlet beyond the prefect, the mayor, or the local policing apparatus. The national representatives of the General Commissariat for Jewish Questions and the Police for Jewish Questions received denunciations, which they passed on to the local


21 For the text see AN F9–5578. In the interest of public order and national security foreigners could be forced to live in certain areas or in centers created for the express purpose of housing suspects. They were subject to close observation by police forces and any infractions concerning residence were punishable by six months' to three years' imprisonment. A complex system of classification of internees was also established distinguishing civil internees from detainees, prisoners of war, forced laborers, foreign workers, foreign undesirables, and French undesirables. See the letter from Le Général d'Armée, Secrétaire d'Etat à la Guerre (14 Aug. 1940) in ADC 976 W–65.
administrative branches. The mission of these organizations to combat the Jewish "plague" posed a serious threat to Jews, a fact surely known and understood by denouncers. The government's desire to solve the "Jewish Question" in France was so strong that officials often set aside the distinction between signed and anonymous denunciations when they concerned Jews.

In this atmosphere of state-sanctioned antisemitism, some letter writers couched their denunciations of Jews almost exclusively in terms of patriotism and civic duty. One woman identified herself by name and as an employee in a state administration who was "sickened" by the lack of patriotism in those around her. In the course of her work, Mademoiselle J. overheard other state employees and civil servants making disparaging remarks about the government. She later discovered that the offenders were either married to Jews or of Jewish descent. Though unwilling to identify the persons by name, Mademoiselle J. asked, "At the time when all good French suffer from the heartbreak of their country and aspire to see her reborn, shouldn't it be urgent to put an end to this underground activity?" She suggested that the French State investigate all employees for their family connections while emphasizing that her letter should be regarded simply as information and not a denunciation, thus revealing the stigma associated with the latter. In another case, a French refugee in the Limoges region denounced a Jewish woman to the Commissariat of Jewish Affairs in the hope of finally seeing her brought to justice for insults, defamation, and

harm she had caused the refugee. Local authorities had failed to prosecute the offensive Jew, so Madame S. turned to national authorities. She found it completely inadmissible that a Frenchwoman like herself be subject to the "hate and destruction" of this "malevolent and ill-intentioned" Jewish woman. As an extra incentive, Madame S. added that it was her "duty as a Frenchwoman" also to inform the authorities of possible illicit gold traffic by the Jewish woman's brother-in-law. 23 Though primarily concerned with the verbal and written abuse from the Jewish woman, Madame S.'s emphasis on the distinction between the good, suffering, and French victim and the evil, thriving, and Jewish aggressor was not enough. She felt she had to include accusations of economic, material misconduct as well.

For others, material concerns appeared to serve as the primary motivation for denouncing a Jew, though their letters were not without patriotic and ideological rhetoric. A woman in the department of the Indre, administratively attached to the region of Limoges, complained that Jewish refugees in her town monopolized the sale of meat and fish. In a letter written directly to Xavier Vallat, the head of the General Commissariat for Jewish Questions, Madame H. expressed her indignation over local officials' inability to put an end to this affair despite the fact that these men violated the laws concerning Jews and commerce. Pushed out of business by the alleged Jewish trade, the victims, who were French veterans of the Great War, now lived in misery. While the author of the letter alludes to "serving France" throughout her denunciation, she framed her main concerns in relation to the food situation and the economic

well being of the town's natives. The material situation motivated her to write, but the moral effects on the population created by such a situation could not be ignored.  

Although these writers both chose to sign their denunciations, authorities thoroughly researched anonymous accusations aimed at Jews, departing from the fight against anonymous letters launched by Pétain after the 1942 speech. The willingness of authorities to investigate anonymous denunciations of Jews implies a different standard for Jews and non-Jews. The Vichy government's fight against slanderous denunciations demonstrates that officials recognized that not all French could be trusted to act honorably by providing real denunciations. However, it seems that this reasoning did not apply when the accused were Jewish despite the fact that false denunciations also targeted Jews. The Special Police Inspector in the Creuse proceeded with a "meticulous investigation" of accusations against Jews in Bourganeuf contained in an anonymous letter mailed to the prefect of the department. His conclusion: "the complaints contained in the previously cited letter are exaggerated as a whole." He found no evidence of anti-government remarks, of "wallets full of food cards," or of illegal packages containing rationed goods as the letter had alleged. The letter writer cited material concerns when the actual motivation probably stemmed from antisemitism. The willingness of officials to

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proceed with investigations despite the possibility of malicious intentions indicates that some government officials assumed that Jews were likely to be engaged in illegal activity, especially anti-national and black market activities, which warranted investigation regardless of the source of the information. Once officials initiated an investigation, the laws concerning foreigners and Jews then made sanctions more threatening.

The persistence of anonymous denunciations throughout the war represented the willful rejection of Vichy's moral agenda as articulated in the distinction between false and true denunciations. But by resorting to informing, the residents of the Limousin also confirmed that they accepted the punishment of others for various infractions, and they made themselves complicit in supporting the Vichy regime. In a time of extreme shortages, it appears that self-interest often influenced the decision to inform—a decision often made easier by the official marginalization and scapegoating of certain key groups. As outsiders, refugees did not have the advantages of natives such as being known to authorities as trustworthy. They also lacked long-term relationships with the inhabitants of the region that could have lessened the impulse to denounce. The refugees were an added drain on already scarce resources in the area around Limoges, prompting some to alert authorities about alleged or substantiated food abuses. Such denunciations affected refugees in ways unique to their situation. Assignment to specific residences or to a Foreign Labor Battalion only struck refugees, and internment decrees also affected them more heavily than permanent residents. However, the denunciatory atmosphere could also lead to alliances. The Vichy period is marked by contradictions, and an examination of denunciations highlights the tensions
between the physical circumstances and ideological and moral imperatives.