

A French medieval historian, who served his country in both world wars, helped pioneer a new approach to history in between them. *John Broich*

THE STUDIOUS RESISTANCE OF MARC BLOCH





Previous page:
Marc Bloch serving
with the 72nd Infantry
Regiment, c.1918.

Above: the University
of Strasbourg, 1949.
Right: German troops
in Belgium, May 1941.

In 1943 a prim figure could be seen most days walking a meandering route across Lyon in occupied France. Starting from a quiet suburban lane, the small man with greying hair might enter an alley to exchange a few words with apparent strangers. Next, to a print shop where his briefcase might click open, papers emerging, and click shut. Halting in a shadowy spot, he would discreetly check slips of paper folded in a book of poetry or medieval lyrics, always at hand. Some days, crossing a bridge over the Rhône, he smiled and shook hands with someone as if he hadn't seen them for years, though the two had met only recently. Monsieur Blanchard – that was the name he gave – was supposedly a salesman, an occupation that justified his long walks through Lyon. But he did not look like one with his round glasses, books and a cane for when his arthritic knee acted up.

And so it might, since the walking routes were long and the days of secret work longer for 'M. Blanchard', regional Resistance leader, code

name, 'Narbonne'. Along those routes, Narbonne collected and delivered coded messages, some going to the saboteurs and assassins of the Maquis, some to other regional commands. He contributed to Lyon's underground newspaper. And, after the Allied landings in Italy in early 1943, Narbonne and other Resistance officers began planning for the Allied invasion of France.

By all reports, Narbonne was an effective leader, especially capable at organisation, able to consider large communication and logistics problems and to make logical plans for overcoming them. He was daring – colleagues suspected that under the gentle exterior was a love of danger – but it was his professionalism, calm and judiciousness that endeared him to his comrades in the Lyon Resistance. A generation older than most, his younger agents revered him as a reassuring father figure, one who was, you could say, 'professorial'.

Agent Narbonne was Professor Marc Bloch. Born into a Jewish family in France in 1886,





Victory march of the Front Populaire, Marseille, 15 June 1936.

Bloch's most recent post had been teaching medieval and economic history at the Sorbonne in Paris. That ended when he reported for duty as a captain in the French army reserve on the eve of war with Germany. It was not his first war.

War lessons

On a morning in June 1918, 31-year-old Captain Bloch's stretch of the Western Front came in for a pounding. The Germans were only eight miles from the provincial capital of Amiens. Bloch needed to hold his line or Paris itself, already subject to the Germans' long-range guns, might be lost. If he and his men could hold on, tanks could be brought to reinforce their line. Under the German artillery barrage a fellow officer was killed near Bloch. Then, with wind conditions favouring the enemy, gas shells started falling among the French. Still, Bloch's men held the line. Bloch received his fourth commendation of the war for that feat, stating he was a model 'of courage and cool resolution'.

His experiences in the Great War were like those of countless others, in that he saw the heights of gritty endurance and the lows of murderously poor leadership. And he witnessed the war's great levelling. A friend, a miner from Calais, died in Bloch's arms. Men and boys of all ranks and stations grew bearded and lice-infested together in the mud. And disease struck a cross-section of French classes, including many of Bloch's friends. Though he came from a bourgeois family, Bloch embraced thereafter a deep sympathy and respect for the working people of France and an esteem for the French army's rank and file.

After the war, Bloch returned to life as a history lecturer, hired by the University of Strasbourg in Alsace, newly transformed from German territory to French. In addition to teaching medieval history, he had to teach French so that hundreds of students could learn in their new language. He married a war hero, Simone Vidal, who had successfully organised refugee relief, and they started a large family.

In these postwar years Bloch developed, with like-minded colleagues in France and Europe, a new historical approach, one that he would put in to practice, in secret, in the months leading up to his transformation from Professor Bloch to Agent Narbonne.

Around the turn of the 20th century, the field of history in European universities had become strong, rigorous and highly professional. Breaking from antiquarianism and history-as-moral-lesson, university historians set new standards in mastering vast archives and great volumes of information to make their arguments. They were conscious and forthcoming about their methods of compiling and distilling data and forming their hypotheses. In many ways, they thought of themselves as scientists.

Learning at the feet of this generation, Bloch and his contemporaries took the next step of examining the sorts of questions they should bring to that rigorously collected data. Where their tutors tended to ask about the origins of nation states, the roots of this or that war, or a certain pope's reign, Bloch and his colleagues consciously chose new questions. If they opened themselves to new sources, could they discover something about the broad realities that shaped the lives of all people, not just generals and popes? Might big, unmoving factors of geography or climate help explain the character of societies? Could historians reveal large, persistent trends in people's beliefs and shared ways of thinking? Bloch and his colleagues hoped to find ways to understand the experiences of the less-educated majority.

Bloch's first attempt at this was his 1924 book *Rois et Thaumaturges* (later translated as *The Royal Touch: Monarchy and Miracles in France and England*), a history of the widespread belief among the pre-modern French and English that their kings could cure diseases such as scrofula. A decade after the Great War, Bloch and like-minded historians formed a journal to collect such new histories. Its title, *Annales d'Histoire Economique et Social*, gave a name to their new school of thought: 'the Annales'.

The next war

In the winter of 1940, Captain Bloch was enduring the cold monotony of the Phoney War, or 'la Drôle de Guerre', in part by reading British

mysteries. He also began drafting a piece on historical methods meant to accompany a new history of France, which he intended to write, but never did. He worried about his six children, wife and frail mother.

A reservist with an arthritic knee, Bloch had reported for duty in the summer of 1939 aged 53. He was a patriot, committed to serving France, but he worried about the army's plans. In his first role of evacuating civilians from frontline areas, he moved around France's north-eastern frontier on a weekly basis. He wrote to his wife that, from what he had seen, the Allies would not be able to stop a Blitzkrieg like that which had overrun Poland.

What he saw of his fellow officers and soldiers concerned him, too. They did not seem to know what they were about to fight for, beside self-defence or vengeance for Poland. To Bloch, it seemed that few saw something bigger at stake in defeating Nazi Germany. He hoped his homeland would fight for the sake of justice within and between nations and, as he wrote to a friend, hoped to hear talk of class cohesion and a common higher purpose. Mostly, he heard crude nationalism.

In late January 1940, as the Phoney War sputtered on, the army offered Captain Bloch a position in the French Military Mission in Oslo. He knew Norway and its language and was attracted to the idea of breaking away from the monotonous wait for the arrival of the Wehrmacht; but he balked at the thought of leaving his family behind. He feared that Germany's concentration camps could be coming to France. His refusal to be far from his family portended a terrible fate.

In May 1940, Bloch retreated with his general's headquarters towards the Channel, ahead of the German tanks moving through the Low Countries. His most recent task had been to get petrol to the right place at the right time. Now his staff was tasked with setting fuel dumps alight rather than delivering it. 'The whole line of our retreat', he later wrote to his teenage daughter, 'was lit by more fires than can ever have been kindled by Attila.'

At each stop along the miserable path to Dunkirk, the Luftwaffe located and bombed them. Throughout the experience, Bloch observed the mistakes, personal shortcomings and confusion of the disintegrating officer corps around him. He also noted instances of



Joseph Darnand during a minute's silence at the Monument aux Morts, Vichy, 1940.

fortitude and bravery, including that of a truck driver who insisted Bloch leave him behind, too injured to stand a chance of survival, but likely to slow his comrades down before the inevitable occurred. Bloch saw it all with a historian's eye: mentally collecting and cataloguing countless anecdotes which, together, would reveal trends.

Beneath the dunes of Dunkirk, Bloch twice managed to get the men under him aboard ships for England; their first ship was sunk by the Germans. He spent one surreal day in England, which seemed a world away from the devastation in France. By nightfall, he was sailing back to fight.

Finally, in June, Bloch's unit was surrounded in Rennes, north-western France. It was the day after Marshal Philippe Pétain asked the Germans for a ceasefire and Bloch watched Wehrmacht lorries roll unopposed into the town. Bloch chose not to be rounded up as an officer and slipped into his professor's clothes. Within hours he was moving through the German-occupied town within arm's reach

of those he'd have shot without hesitation only the day before. The deception, he later recorded, gave him a 'malicious pleasure'.

Having escaped to the southern Unoccupied Zone of France, ruled by the collaborators in Vichy, Bloch was soon back to teaching history in Clermont. By the autumn of 1940, the Vichy government published its Statut des Juifs, a set of anti-Jewish decrees reducing Jews' citizenship and barring them from many professions. Bloch's university had to get special dispensation for him to teach, while friends in the US tried to secure him and his family visas. When it became clear that his ailing mother and teenage daughter could not be included, he abandoned any plan of leaving France.

Class war

In this climate of fear and anger, Bloch opened a new notebook. He decided to apply his skills as a historian of social currents to the fall of France. 'Will these pages ever be published?', he began,

Klaus Barbie, head of the Gestapo in Lyon, 1942.

'Against Communism' poster produced by the Milice, 1944.



I cannot tell ... Nevertheless, I have quite made up my mind to proceed with the writing of them, though the effort will be harsh and exacting. How much easier it would be to plead weariness and discouragement as an excuse for doing nothing!

Bloch described France's sluggish movement and sluggish thinking. His superiors, he wrote, seemed to want to fight the last war, while the Germans were fighting the next. The French wanted to establish lines and fronts; the Germans, to make slices and cuts.

It was unthinkable to [a] staff that we should put up any kind of resistance without plotting on the map and then pegging out on the ground a fine continuous 'line' with switches, forwards positions, battle zones, and all the rest of it.

In reaction to repeated German breakthroughs, Bloch's superiors ordered retreats of a few miles; but while a few miles' retreat had been

sufficient in the last war, it now meant little to Panzer tanks and nothing to bombers.

Bloch wrote that the French, in turn, failed to learn from German tank tactics in Poland or France. 'Those attending the cavalry courses at the staff college', he wrote, 'had had it drilled into them that, though tanks might be tolerably useful in defence, their value for attack was nil.'

Bloch's analysis, however, went beyond tactical errors. He sought to examine a spirit that seemed to haunt the officer and political class. There was a spectre, he argued, that whispered in their ears: democracy and liberalism have failed; don't die for them. France in the 1930s experienced what many countries had: a titanic brawl between Left and Right. Labour and communist parties wrestled with anti-labour and fascists, sometimes literally, in the streets. The large centre, where, as a comfortable professor, Bloch placed himself (though his sympathy lay with the workers) often watched with dumb complacency.

After the 1936 election, Léon Blum managed to assemble a leftist-labour coalition government and started to address the effects of the Depression on French workers. It won a 40-hour work week, facilitated rights for workers to strike and helped raise wages. Bloch detected irritation among the middle class that working men and women were improving their lot. They were piqued that labourers were getting what they felt was an undeserved leg up through ballots and strikes. Workers, some believed, were forgetting their place.

The Blum government also tried to break ancient strangleholds on institutions that perpetuated class dominance. It created, for example, a public civil service college to open access to government jobs. This bred resentment, which rightist parties capitalised on until, in some quarters, the slogan became 'Better Hitler than Blum'.

In his notebook, Bloch wrote that, just as 'a monarchy needs a personnel composed of monarchists', France needed a ruling class of dedicated democrats – and France needed such democrats most in its moment of peril in Spring 1940. But, democracy having threatened their dominance and station, 'higher officials bred up to despise it ... serve it only half-heartedly'. Bloch noted that:

They were only too ready to despair of the country they had been called upon to defend, and of the people who furnished the soldiers they commanded ... They were ready to find consolation in the thought that beneath the ruins of France a shameful regime might be crushed to death.

Bloch argued that this was not the fault of the rank and file French soldier, whose heroics he described and honoured; it was the fault of the older, higher officers, who backed surrender and Pétain to hide their guilt and hurry providence's punishment for indulging liberalisation.

Bloch's own generation of middle-class First World War veterans had failed, he argued, to inculcate their country with the greatest virtues of France: democracy, liberty and a desire to raise the level of justice and equality for every citizen. Bloch included himself in this failure, one that left far too many in positions of authority who eventually accepted the

ruination of France at the hands of the authoritarians.

Closing his notebook and hiding it away in September 1940, it would remain a secret, a historical record of mentalities and a lament for his country, until its discovery in 1946.

In early 1943 a young member of a Resistance cell in Lyon, 'Maurice', introduced a fresh recruit to his comrades. The others in the cell did not learn Marc Bloch's real name. They were never shared. Naturally, his comrades gave him few important responsibilities at first as they tested his trustworthiness. The younger Résistants, meanwhile, took to him like a favourite professor.

Indeed, Bloch brought his academic skills to his expanding responsibilities. When the Gestapo or French police put their plans awry – a matter of weapons transports, perhaps, or coordination with other units – Bloch said: 'Come we mustn't let ourselves be carried away. The great thing is to isolate and limit the problem.' Like the historian mastering a disordered archive, he would distil order from confusion. He worked on a raft of tasks over the next year, quickly rising to become an officer, planning missions for regional fighters and saboteurs, aiding underground newspapers and helping undermine deportations of French workers to Germany. He became a delegate to other French Resistance groups, which in Autumn 1943 took him to Paris, where he dared to walk down the street on which his family had lived before the war. An air-raid searchlight was now installed on one of his home's balconies.

It was a hunted life. Dropping aliases helped, but it was particularly dangerous to hold a leadership position, being known to so many agents. If just one of them was seized and made to talk, perhaps describing the greying man with the cane, the modest house in the Lyon suburb, the rooms above the dress factory that served as his headquarters, the enemy would have him. And there were frequent arrests. The Lyon office of the Gestapo, led by the sadistic Klaus Barbie, was ever-present. Vichy's anti-Resistance militia, the Milice, led by the French fascist Joseph Darnand, also operated throughout the city. Bloch, meanwhile, saw lorries taking French Jews to their fate.

'If I survive this, I shall go back to my teaching', Bloch was known to say. It was a big if. A few months into 1944, though his spirits



Marc Bloch, c.1940.

Further reading
Carole Fink *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (Cambridge, 1989)

Marc Bloch *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, translated by Gerard Hopkins (New York, 1968)

had risen with Allied progress into northern Italy, he hinted to friends and family that he was too exposed to survive much longer. So when, in March 1944, the Gestapo closed in on him, he could not have been surprised. A raid at a colleague's headquarters yielded five agents to Barbie's torture chamber. Bloch quickly learned of the arrests but, whether to avoid conspicuous signs of panic or out of a sense of fatalism, attended a small dinner party that same night. The next morning, he slipped away just before the Gestapo's black sedans appeared near his secret headquarters in the dress factory. A baker, though, told the Germans which way he had gone. They cornered Narbonne on a bridge over the Rhône. In the coming days, Vichy newspapers celebrated the Gestapo's arrest of this 'terrorist', whom, they pointed out, was a Jew.

Those imprisoned and tortured alongside Bloch in Lyon's infamous Montluc prison reported that he never spoke except to give his real name, that of a 'mere' professor, perhaps to suggest that he had simply been in the wrong

place at the wrong time. Ever the historian, having recovered from one of his rounds of torture, Bloch offered a tutorial to some inmates on medieval French history.

After two more rounds of torture, he could only have been bolstered when news of the massive Allied landing in Normandy passed through the prison fortress via coded knocks. Those landings, though, meant his end, as the Gestapo began systematically murdering most of its Lyon prisoners over the coming few weeks before withdrawing.

A witness told of a stoic scene where Bloch and two dozen others were led to a field and there faced the firing squad, with no pleas, no cries except, 'Vive la France'. He had devoted his life to France's best ideals of liberty and equality, even after many others had abandoned them.

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