

Comics and Propaganda : France 1939-1944

La Bande Dessinée et la Propagande France: 1939-1944

The new student exhibit in Bostock Library explores the juvenile press in France from 1939 to 1945. The exhibit was designed and curated by students in [Professor Clare Tufts' s](#) Fall 2012 course, *Comics and Culture: Images of Modern France in the Making* (French 414/Visual and Media Studies 312).

When Paris was liberated in the summer of 1944, a beautifully illustrated, twenty-nine page, hardback comic book about this period in France's history appeared on the market seemingly overnight. This publication, *La bête est morte!* (The Beast is Dead!) presented a pictorial account of a world war among animals who represented all of the major players of the second World War. The image of the French and their actions during the Occupation is glowing: France's enemies were barbarian hordes from other countries (with Hitler as the big bad wolf, Mussolini as a hyena, and the Japanese as yellow monkeys), all evil came from outside the borders of the homeland, ordinary French citizens were docile rabbits and industrious squirrels, and their savior was a great white stork wearing a Lorraine cross. Although De Gaulle and the Resistance are glorified through the symbolism of purity and rebirth in the figure of the stork, the story does not touch on the subject of collaboration.

The new student exhibit in the IAS cases in Bostock explores the juvenile press in France from 1939 and 1945. During this time period, comics provided children and adolescents a regular diet of fact, fiction, and outright propaganda about the Germans, the Vichy regime, the Allies, and eventually, the Resistance. The exhibit highlights a selection of those publications, focusing on the messages passed on to their youthful audience and the heroes they created for them, in order to show how the medium was a valued tool used to form a post-war generation of young adults primed to accept and support the prevailing political ideology. Out of the more than two dozen papers that were available between 1939 and 1945, the student display presents traces the history of the following publications:

- Three weeklies available in France on the eve of the war: *Le Journal de Mickey*, *Jumbo* and *Coeurs vaillants/Ames vaillantes* (*Stout-Hearted/ Brave-Souled*) which migrated south to unoccupied France and underwent significant changes in content and format.
- The comic *Le Téméraire* (*The Audacious*), which started publication in Paris during the Occupation; and the weekly *Vaillant* (*Valiant*) born with the Liberation and filled with realistic images of fighting and resistance.
- The exhibit also includes presentations on the Nazi Propaganda Comic *Vica* and the comic book *La Bête est morte!*

Le Journal de Mickey was the paper that revolutionized the juvenile press in France when it was created in 1934, both because of its format (large size; bright colors) and content (American comics; speech balloons), and it soon became the standard by which other weeklies were measured. The Italian paper *Jumbo* was first published in France in 1935 but it did not become a top seller until 1939 when its look was updated and its content was changed to include several popular American strips. The *Coeurs Vaillants/Ames Vaillantes* provided a contrast to the above. Whereas the main goal for the editors of both *The Journal de Mickey* and *Jumbo* was to make money by attracting loyal fans to their eye-catching and entertaining pages, the weekly *Coeurs vaillants* was a publication with a different mission – namely, to teach its readers to be good Catholics, morally upright and model citizens. While the editors of *Coeurs vaillants* positioned their 100 percent French weekly as the patriotic alternative to the scandalous foreign press, they nevertheless made some format changes during the 1930s to put it on a more equal footing with its competitors in terms of visual appeal, and they astutely incorporated several comic strips that ensured a loyal readership. For example, *Coeurs vaillants* was the first weekly in France to publish a science fiction strip on its cover, and the Belgian Hergé contributed a selection of his immensely popular Tintin comics. The student exhibit traces the move of these papers to the unoccupied south of France and the history of changes in format, content and political outlook of these publications during the last years of World War II.

The student exhibit also highlights some examples of the French press in occupied France. The publication of all papers was suspended when the Germans entered Paris in June 1940. But a few months later some of those weeklies had returned to newsstands. One of the new weeklies, *Le Téméraire*, stands in stark contrast to the other weeklies in the exhibit for reasons both artistic and political. Propaganda saturates the entire paper, not just on the cover or in an editorial column, and not simply through singing the praises of Pétain or of a New Europe. It offers a combination of historical or "scientific" reports; serial comic, adventure, detective, or futuristic strips; and editorial messages expounding ideologies that are pro-German, pro-fascist, anti-Semitic, racist, anti-Russian, anti-British, anti-American, etc. When the first issue came off the German-controlled presses in Paris on January 15, 1943, *Le Téméraire* was the only juvenile paper available in the city, and one of only two distributed in the whole of occupied France. In overall design *Le Téméraire* included the most popular elements from the decimated press of Occupied France, as well as those of other papers during their heyday. It is remarkable that this paper was able to retain its original size, number of pages, vivid color, and high-quality paper during the period of the Occupation when the press in general was severely crippled by paper rationing and lack of other resources.

The Vica comics (Rubenstein is the only holding library in the US), are another example of a publication from Occupied France. The Vica strip of March 15, 1943 uses the theme of desirable "modern youth" versus undesirable "French youth": The character Vica is upset because the moon has sneezed and blown apart the Eiffel Tower, and he thinks that young French people are too lazy and indecisive to help put it back together. The strip ends on a high note, however, when a busload of members of the "Cercle des Téméraires" (i.e., "modern youth") arrives to fix the problem. It is easy to see that the paper's mission was a far cry from pure entertainment (pre-war *Mickey* and *Jumbo*), Catholic moral instruction (*Coeurs vaillants*), or even proselytization of Pétain's vision of the National Revolution. The fourth issue features an article about blood types and the purity of Aryan blood versus the impurity of the blood of the "mixed" races in Russia; issue 10 recounts how the Semites of Ancient Greece ritualistically sacrificed children; issue 18 criticizes the Ku Klux Klan (despite its racist ideology) because its members

were supposedly freemasons, and therefore descendants of the builders of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The comic *Vaillant* serves as an example of a paper founded shortly after liberation. Most presses came to a standstill in late summer 1944, when Paris was liberated and members of the Vichy government went into exile in Germany, and on January 13, 1945 the Minister of Information declared a suspension of all children's weeklies. Despite that suspension, a new weekly called *Vaillant* was born just six months later – thanks to the efforts of several members of the Resistance who were members of the group F.P.J. (Front patriotique de la jeunesse) and who "piggybacked" their publication onto an obscure underground communist paper called *Le Jeune Patriote*. For the editorial team, the title *Vaillant* signified the courage that the youths of France were expected to show in the face of the suffering and hard work that would be required to rebuild the nation, but its choice provoked anger among priests and other supporters of *Coeurs vaillants*, who charged that it was stolen from their paper (Crépin 2001: 150). *Vaillant* was able to survive amidst a severe paper shortage and the censorship of every paper suspected of collaboration with the Vichy or German governments, because *Le Jeune Patriote* was originally a simple publication to inform the communist youths fighting in the Resistance. It evolved quickly into a more traditional weekly, however, with a format and layout not unlike that of *Le Téméraire* (full-page cover image, for example) and a title that led many to assume an association with the pro-Pétain *Coeurs vaillants*. The June 1, 1945 issue of *Vaillant* has a cover illustration of Allied soldiers planting their flags on French soil, with the word "victoire" [victory] printed across the bottom. In the top left corner is the announcement of a new strip called "Fifi gars du maquis". This realistic strip, which sings the praises of the Resistance fighters and inspires hatred of the German occupiers, ran as a regular feature of *Vaillant* from June 1, 1945 until November 20, 1947, and some were reprinted as comic books. The main character Fifi is the archetypal maquisard [French Resistance fighter], who engages in all kinds of resistance efforts: he delivers secret messages, captures German officers, hijacks convoys to get arms and ammunition, sabotages train trestles, and carries out summary

executions of members of the Gestapo. He is also captured and tortured by the enemy before being freed by his companions.

The exhibit is located in the IAS Exhibit cases on the second floor of Bostock Library across from the International and Area Studies Offices until March 15, 2013. Directions:

<http://library.duke.edu/apps/locationguide/areamap/41/>

Exhibit description provided by Professor Clare Tufts.

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Through March 15, Bostock Library Exhibit Cases
Second Floor, near International and Area Studies Offices