

Routledge Studies in the Modern History of France

THE MAN WHO MURDERED ADMIRAL DARLAN

**VICHY, THE ALLIES AND THE RESISTANCE IN FRENCH
NORTH AFRICA**

Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon

Translated by Richard Carswell



The Man Who Murdered Admiral Darlan

In November 1942, Anglo-American forces landed in French North Africa, which soon afterwards broke with Marshal Pétain's Vichy regime in France and re-entered the war on the Allies' side. On Christmas Eve, the high commissioner Admiral François Darlan was assassinated in Algiers. Why? Like the press and public opinion in Britain and America, General Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement and the resistance in France were appalled that the Allies had allowed Darlan to retain office, even though as prime minister under Pétain, he had previously advocated military collaboration with Nazi Germany. Few mourned Darlan's death, many were relieved and some were jubilant.

His killer was Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle. Who was this 20-year-old and what drove him to murder? Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon paints a sympathetic portrait of the young idealist manipulated by local resistance leaders. As she tells Bonnier's story, the author illuminates the imbroglío of North Africa's competing political forces. She traces Bonnier's short life, the assassination, his court martial and execution within 48 hours and the subsequent judicial investigations which became bogged down in the complex rivalry between the Allies, the remnants of the Vichy regime, the Resistance and other factions. The story ends with Bonnier's posthumous rehabilitation and recognition as a member of the French Resistance.

Bonnier's biography reads like an absorbing novel, with its twists and turns, reconstructed dialogue and author's acute observations. As well as being a tragic human story, it is an illuminating study of the convoluted political context of the affair, which will be unfamiliar to some Anglophone readers. It is an academically rigorous piece of original research, based in part on previously inaccessible family archives.

Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon's story of Darlan's assassination was received in France as

- 'a shocking book and a historian's great work' (*Le Patriote Résistant*)
- 'a detailed enquiry . . . bordering on a detective novel which brings out the conspiratorial atmosphere reigning in Algiers in the wake of the Allied landing of 8 November 1942' (*Le Monde des Livres*)
- it 'shows the extent to which the 1940s were years of complete ambiguity' (*Le Figaro Littéraire*)
- 'Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon, a meticulous historian, paints the portrait of a young idealist dying to wash away the stain of defeat' (*Midi Libre*)

Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon is one of France's most distinguished historians of the Second World War, Vichy and the Resistance. A graduate of the Institut d'études politiques de Paris and a doctor of history, she has written numerous award-winning books, including biographies of Jean Moulin and Marshal Pétain.

The translator, **Richard Carswell**, is the author of *The Fall of France in the Second World War: History and Memory* (2019).

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Translated by Richard Carswell

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Introduction

Defeat and the French empire

In June 1940, France suffered a catastrophic military defeat at the hands of German armed forces. The fighting was brought to a halt when the French government under Marshal Philippe Pétain signed armistices with Germany and its last-minute co-belligerent Italy. France withdrew from the war and became a neutral, at least on paper. Under the armistice agreements, about three-fifths of metropolitan France was occupied by German and Italian troops. France's army was reduced to 100,000 men. However, France was allowed to keep its overseas empire and fleet. At the time, the French empire was the second largest in the world. It comprised colonies, protectorates, League of Nations mandates and overseas departments. It stretched from the Caribbean in the west to Africa, the Levant, India, Indo-China and the Pacific in the east. The jewel in the crown was French North Africa (today Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia).

In the days immediately following France's military defeat, there were calls in the colonies to reject the armistice and keep on fighting on Britain's side. But the French government quickly quelled embryonic rebellions in most of the major overseas territories. They submitted to the authority of what became known as the Vichy regime (named after the small spa town where Pétain's government moved its headquarters at the beginning of July 1940). There the Third Republic was abolished and replaced by *l'État français* (the French State), a right-wing, authoritarian and anti-democratic regime, in which Pétain exercised executive, legislative and judicial power. Pétain intended to realise his dream of regime change through a deeply conservative National Revolution which he championed.

De Gaulle and the Free French

The external resistance to Pétain's policy of withdrawing from the war and collaborating with Germany was led by General Charles de Gaulle, based in London. Supported by the British government, de Gaulle argued that it was wrong and treasonous to sign an armistice with the enemy since the war was a world war. France had a fleet, an empire and an ally in Britain and, together, they could call on the resources of the United States to finally defeat the Axis powers. De Gaulle's

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argument was encapsulated in the famous slogan 'France has lost a battle but France has not lost the war'. He and his followers were condemned by Vichy as 'dissidents'. Vichy sentenced de Gaulle to death *in absentia*.

Vichy's brittle neutrality

Although France under Vichy was now a neutral, Britain and the Free French applied pressure to prevent its armed forces and territories from coming under total German domination. Britain and the Free French also hoped that France would rejoin the war on the Allies' side. At times, France and Britain even came close to war, when for example the Royal Navy bombarded French warships at the naval base of Mers el-Kébir near Oran in Algeria in July 1940, causing the death of some 1,300 French sailors. The French bombed Gibraltar in retaliation.

In August 1940, with British support, the Free French took control of the French mandate of Cameroun and most of French Equatorial Africa with its capital at Brazzaville. In September, an Anglo-Free French naval and military expedition tried unsuccessfully to land at Dakar, the capital of French West Africa. Governor Pierre Boisson, loyal to Vichy, ordered his local forces to fight back. Frenchmen killed Frenchmen. France and its empire were also subject to the British naval blockade, designed to prevent traded goods from being diverted to Germany and Italy. This economic pressure was only partly relieved by the food aid programme provided by the United States to French North Africa.

Under Admiral François Darlan, appointed Pétain's deputy in February 1941, Vichy compromised its neutral status in several ways, on one occasion letting German military aircraft use air bases in the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon in May 1941. Darlan was also willing (under the draft Protocols of Paris) to give the Germans access to military facilities in French North and West Africa. One result of Darlan's search for collaboration with Germany was the Anglo-Free French assault on Syria and Lebanon from June to July 1941 to oust the Vichy authorities there. Again, Frenchmen fought and killed Frenchmen.

North Africa

While French North Africa remained unoccupied by Germans and Italians, the local military and civilian authorities were content to support Vichy. Most of the European population of French North Africa supported the National Revolution and endorsed Vichy's discriminatory legislation penalising Jews, freemasons, communists and Gaullist dissidents. A particularly vindictive piece of Vichy's legislation was the annulment of the Crémieux decrees of 1870, which had given French citizenship to the Jews of Algeria.

With the army in metropolitan France reduced to 100,000 men under the terms of the armistice and with over one and a half million French soldiers in prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, the Army of Africa, France's largest armed force, was stationed in North Africa. It counted approximately 200,000 men, though poorly equipped. Its headquarters were in Algiers, and its main function was to maintain law and

order. From July 1941, the commander-in-chief was General Alphonse Juin. Since France was neutral, the Army of Africa took no part in the ‘Desert War’, the fighting in Libya and Egypt between Axis and British and Commonwealth forces in 1940–1942. Two years after France’s defeat, the Army of Africa remained loyal to Marshal Pétain.

Allied strategy in the Mediterranean

In the summer of 1942, the British and Americans agreed on the next phase of the war in the west. The Allies would occupy French North Africa, instead of invading mainland Europe, as the Americans had originally advocated. Seizing French North Africa would help to end the Desert War and remove Axis forces from Africa. It would also provide a springboard from which to attack Italy, ‘the soft underbelly of Europe’: The Allied landings in Morocco and Algeria were given the name Operation TORCH.

The Americans were in a position to prepare the ground in advance. Unlike Britain, which had ceased to have full diplomatic relations with France since July 1940, the United States had an embassy in Vichy and consular officials in French North Africa. The leading American official there was Robert Murphy, consul-general in Algiers and President Roosevelt’s personal representative. In addition, the Americans had officials in the area to supervise their food aid programme in French North Africa. Some officials acted as spies. Murphy also cultivated secret contacts among senior French military and civilian personalities in Algiers, Oran and Rabat, who were sympathetic to the Allies.

Murphy and his agents knew that the Army of Africa was a substantial force led by patriotic officers loyal to Vichy and hostile to de Gaulle and the British. The army was under strict orders to resist any invasion from any quarter, in order to preserve Vichy’s neutrality, as required by the armistices signed with Germany and Italy. The Americans hoped the Army of Africa would not oppose the landings. Nevertheless, in case it decided to resist, Murphy had used his secret contacts to build a network of conspirators. At the time of the landings, the conspirators planned to obstruct the transmission of orders to the Army of Africa and to seize control of key facilities including military headquarters, central post offices and radio stations.

General de Gaulle and his Free French movement were excluded from the planning of Operation TORCH. President Roosevelt had a low opinion of de Gaulle as a political leader. He insisted that the Free French must not be told of the landings in advance, in order to preserve maximum security. It was also agreed that the British should stay in the background during the operation, so as not to provoke the Army of Africa and the French navy.

Instead of de Gaulle, the Americans found another French figurehead for the operation. They chose a five-star general, Henri Giraud, a widely admired soldier. He had been captured by the Germans in May 1940 and two years later had managed to escape all the way from the fortress prison of Königstein in eastern Germany to the unoccupied zone in France. He was anti-German and not suspected

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of being a Gaullist. The Americans would use Giraud to rally French North Africa to the Allies' cause. Giraud agreed to the American plan, although the operation would be led not by him, but by General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Operation TORCH

Operation TORCH was a massive sea-borne undertaking, bringing over 100,000 men and equipment from America and Britain, in 200 warships and 110 transport vessels with substantial air force cover. The landings of the three task forces took place at 11 sites near Casablanca, Oran and Algiers very early in the morning of Sunday, 8 November 1942. The bulk of the troops were American but included some British forces.

The Americans partly were assisted on the ground in Algiers by the conspirators organised by Murphy, a mixed group of several hundred mainly young men. They were to become known as the 'Men of 8 November'. They were clandestinely armed on the orders of General Mast of the Army of Africa. In the move planned in advance with the Americans, they staged in the early hours of 8 November what is sometimes called the Algiers putsch. They seized key points in the city before the Americans landed. But the putsch was quickly quashed. Elsewhere the conspiracy failed. The Allied troops disembarking near Oran and Casablanca were fired on by Vichy's forces under strict orders to resist the invasion. The fighting was fierce, resulting in many casualties on both sides.

Due to his lengthy discussions with Eisenhower in Gibraltar, Giraud did not arrive in Algiers until 9 November. In the meantime, on Radio Algiers, one of the conspirators – during the short time that they were in control of the city – read Giraud's appeal to the Army of Africa to join forces with the Allies. It had no effect. The Army of Africa continued to fire on the Allies.

By chance, Admiral Darlan was in Algiers on 8 November. He had come to visit his son in hospital, ill with poliomyelitis. Darlan was grand admiral of the French fleet, minister of the navy, commander-in-chief of all French armed forces, a former vice-president of the council of ministers and Marshal Pétain's designated heir. As such, he was the most senior person in authority in Algeria on that day. Darlan ordered a vigorous response, telling Murphy:

This is yet more of the rubbish you Anglo-Saxons have heaped on us during the last two years. I have orders from the Marshal. I will carry them out. Since you want to fight, we will fight.

But Darlan soon realised that, given the balance of forces, the French were in no position to fight. So, the opportunist that he was, he changed tack. Having quickly lost confidence in Giraud, the Americans had no hesitation in using Darlan to bring the Army of Africa to heel. On 9 November, Darlan authorised his local deputy General Juin to negotiate a ceasefire in the Algiers region. On 10 November, Darlan used his authority to impose a cessation of hostilities on the rest of Algeria and Morocco, announcing that he was assuming political control of French North

Africa with the authority of Marshal Pétain (a fiction). The balance of the fighting was 500 American and over 1,000 French dead.

Meanwhile, in France, in response to Operation TORCH, the Wehrmacht crossed the demarcation line on 11 November and occupied the rest of the country virtually unopposed. But although the Germans had thus violated the armistice, Pétain refused to order the French fleet at Toulon to set sail to escape possible seizure by the Germans. The commander of the fleet, Admiral Jean de Laborde, conservative and violently anti-British, ignored Darlan's appeals on 10 and 11 November to set sail out of harm's way. When German units approached the port in the early hours of 27 November, the fleet scuttled itself. It was one of the most astounding events of the war.

Soon after the American landings in Morocco and Algeria, German troops arrived by air in Tunisia. Their navy vessels entered the port of Bizerte. By the end of November, most of Tunisia was under German and Italian control. The Axis reinforcements moved quickly to assist Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and his forces in retreating westwards from Egypt, following the battle of El Alamein (23 October to 11 November). Although the Allies had intended to push their troops rapidly eastwards into Tunisia once ashore in Morocco and Algeria, their progress immediately slowed to a snail's pace, due to confusion, faulty logistics, technical problems and muddy roads. The Allies' war to expel the Axis from Africa was to last another six months until May 1943.

The 'Darlan deal'

The ceasefires ordered by Darlan in Morocco and Algeria solved a military problem. But now the Allies faced a political problem. They had not anticipated Darlan being present in Algiers at the time of the landings. Nor had they foreseen that Giraud would be politically naïve and *persona non grata*. Giraud was spurned by the Army of Africa still loyal to Vichy. Some officers considered him a traitor.

As the ultimate act of pragmatism, Eisenhower now backed Darlan, recognising Darlan as the High Commissioner of French Africa and commander-in-chief of all armed forces in French Africa. Nevertheless, to save Giraud's face, the Americans persuaded Darlan to appoint Giraud as commander-in-chief of the army in North Africa. Otherwise, the status quo was unchanged. All the local military and civilian staff – hitherto loyal to Vichy – kept their positions. Vichy's laws remained in place, including the anti-Semitic legislation.

Whatever Pétain's thoughts about the situation might have been – and we have no reliable evidence of what they were – Vichy stripped Darlan of all his offices. Nevertheless, Darlan claimed to be acting with the Marshal's authority. That was the assurance he gave to Boisson, governor-general of French West Africa. Darlan told him that his aim was to block the path of 'the dissidents', namely the Gaullists, whereupon Boisson switched sides and joined the Allies on 23 November. Darlan also concluded an agreement with Eisenhower's deputy, Lieutenant-General Mark Clark, that the Americans would re-equip the Army of Africa.

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The position of the Gaullists in North Africa was weak. Prior to the landings, de Gaulle and the Free French intelligence service (the BCRA), based in London and Brazzaville, had had little access to local sources of information in North Africa. Some of the 'Men of 8 November' had Gaullist sympathies. But their moment was now past it seemed, since Darlan was now in the saddle. However, that was not to reckon with a new, unforeseen factor that burst onto the scene: the intense critical reaction in Britain and the United States and among the resistance movements in North Africa and metropolitan France. The British press could barely contain itself. The criticism began with a piece in the left-wing weekly *Tribune* by the Labour Member of Parliament, Aneurin Bevan. He asked, 'What kind of a Europe have we in mind? One built by rats for rats?' More diplomatically, *The Times* suggested that 'few people at the present stage like the granting of status to a man who . . . has often proclaimed the need to collaborate with the enemies of Britain, America and France itself'. And the American radio broadcaster in London, Ed Murrow, wanted to know whether the Allies would be prepared to occupy Norway and turn it over to Quisling on grounds of military expediency.

Roosevelt was forced to declare publicly that the arrangement was a 'temporary expedient', justified by the necessities of war. It was not enough. Despite Churchill's attempts to censor him, de Gaulle in London managed to make his views known publicly too. The deal amounted to dishonour and treason, the vile work of a handful of culprits. But he was optimistic:

Contrary to what American officials say about the needs of the cause, we have in North Africa countless passionate supporters. Naturally they are not in the higher reaches of the administration nor of the army, nor among the rich colonial settlers. They are to be found in the popular masses, both French and indigenous, in the liberal professions and among the junior officers of the Army . . . the game will be tough, but I am firmly hopeful.

There was no doubt that Darlan had become a severe public embarrassment for the Allies. The permanent secretary of the Foreign Office, Sir Alexander Cadogan, recorded in his diary a conversation with de Gaulle. 'De G.'s one remedy is "Get rid of Darlan". My answer is "Yes, but how?" No answer'.

Christmas Eve 1942

He is standing in the hallway, near the office door. From there, he sees the entrance perfectly and cannot miss any comings and goings. In his head, he goes through the stages of the plan that he wants to believe in. He will have to act quickly.

What is he feeling as he waits? Is his heart beating faster? Is his stomach in knots? Is he clenching his hand in his pocket? Has he any doubts, however fleeting, perhaps even want to give up? He is so close to the Spahi guard and the porter that he must be afraid they can sense his tension.

Then, suddenly, the moment arrives. He hears a laugh, the noise of a conversation drawing near. The admiral passes by the door, he is easily recognisable and is accompanied by another officer. They move forward without paying him any attention. Very quickly, they are level with him. He takes out his gun hurriedly and opens fire. He shoots five times, injuring the admiral and hitting his companion while trying to break free during a brief struggle.

Somebody rushes forward and restrains him. They hit him. He shouts, 'I give up. Don't kill me'.

He has just assassinated Admiral Darlan.

The assassin does not have a name.

The assassination is kept secret for 12 hours before the local press is officially informed and authorised to circulate the news. In reality, fewer than three hours later, the whole of Algiers knows Darlan has been shot.

On Christmas morning 1942, Admiral Darlan's death makes the press headlines in Algeria and Morocco. The murderer, they say, was arrested immediately. He is in the hands of the authorities. He is a young man in his twenties.

But who is he? The communiqué from General Bergeret, Deputy High Commissioner for French Africa, indicates clearly the line to be followed. 'Admiral Darlan has just fallen at his post, the victim of an assassination inspired by those who did not forgive him for responding to the French people's wishes and resuming the struggle against Germany on the side of the Allies'.

Quite logically, therefore, we are talking about a German or an Italian agent. (Allied troops are also fighting the Italians in Tunisia, in a battle that is holding everybody's attention.) It is disclosed, correctly, that the assassin's mother is Italian.

The search of his living quarters has led to the seizure of correspondence in Italian, hence suspect.

He could not be more French, claims the correspondent of the British news agency Reuters four days later. Its first news reports were hesitant, but there is no doubt anymore: in Algiers, a growing number of people know very well who the assassin is.

His name cannot be given for military security reasons, General Giraud, the new civilian and military commander-in-chief, tells American journalists. The general does not even understand why so much fuss is being made about this young man, while hundreds of brave young men are dying every day at the front. The young man would have done better to join them if he was so determined to risk his life. All the same, the American news agency United Press reveals that Admiral Darlan was killed not by an Axis agent, but by somebody who, on the contrary, was bitter that the admiral had been Vichy's head of government.

The Germans have their own theory about the reasons for this prolonged silence, which according to them is very characteristic of the British Intelligence Service. It is obvious that the British are behind this murder, carried out to promote the cause of their straw man, General de Gaulle. It is proof – if it was needed – of the violent disagreements between British and American allies. The assassin is French, they claim. He comes from Marseille and belongs to a family well known in literary and political circles.

He is definitely not Italian, confirms Radio Rome. He is a young Gaullist, announces as well Radio Fighting France from Brazzaville, and his mother is not Italian in the slightest.

Days pass. A week, then two. Darlan's death has been replaced on the front pages by war news. But in the evening of 7 January 1943, German radio stations and, in their wake, Radio Paris announce the name of the man who killed Darlan, discovered thanks to indiscreet American remarks originating in Tangiers, a town under Spanish control and in principle neutral.

This name is repeated the following day in the British press, not all of whose correspondents have heard the same thing, however. Hornier, write some. Bornier, perhaps, if it is not Bonnier, Bonnier de la Cappel. Beaumier de La Chapelle, according to an intelligence network.

'Bonnier de la Chapelle' is how the name appears in the better-informed Paris collaborationist dailies. He is a Gaullist, the son of a sports journalist in Algiers and a Jewess, a detail added by the German radio stations. The whole family had been under surveillance by French military security since 1940 and were the target of several police searches. The assassin is the elder of the two sons. The second is still a student. The murderer's uncle and adoptive father, located in the Boulevard Raspail by reporters of *Le Petit Parisien*, declares he knows no more than what he has heard on the radio at the same time as everyone else.

The assassin still does not have a first name. And it will require another year for it to be revealed, following the decision to establish the truth about his act.

He was called Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle, He was 20 years old.

I ‘I don’t want to die without having fought’

(PIERRE DRIEU DE LA ROCHELLE, *CHARLOTTE CORDAY*,
ACT II, SCENE I)

The start of the new school year 1930. Fernand is not yet eight years old. He has the round face of a little child.

He has left the land of his birth, his family and his mother. Or more exactly his mother has left him by leaving his father. And there he is, in an impressive school, among the youngest pupils, in the midst of strangers, with his rich child’s immaculate suit and boarder’s trunk.

Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle is starting out at the prestigious *École des Roches*, the Norman haven for children of a cosmopolitan aristocracy and progressive upper middle class, their gaze directed towards Protestantism and England. They are parents with a keen interest in modern education. Between themselves, they think the *École des Roches* is what comes closest in France to an English public school. Captains of industry and men of the world are not made by scholars of Latin. For 30 years the school has educated excellent students. Not only are they good at prose composition and robust sportsmen, but they are also accomplished Christians and boys with an acute sense of their responsibilities, able to turn into men who command and do their duty.

For the time being, Fernand is still only in the preparatory school for 6–11-year-olds. It is located on the estate of the *Maison de La Guichardière*, specially converted for the youngest pupils. The house, which accommodates about 50 pupils, is run by the philosopher Louis Garrone, who advocates an intense inner life for minds troubled by anxiety and a sense of sacrifice. Fortunately, his wife Monique is more concerned with practical realities. Together with the housekeepers, she assumes the material responsibility for those children who still do not know fully how to look after themselves, how to keep their clothes in a fit state, how not to lose their things, how to observe timetables and how to know where to go even on the estate’s 60 hectares.

At the ‘Guiche’, there is certainly no shortage of sleep. Fernand gets up at 7.30 am. He is in bed by 8.15 pm after roll call, the quarter of an hour of meditation and prayer. In the meantime, he has had an afternoon nap from 1 to 2 pm. Even until 2.30 in the summer term, because of the heat. Which must amuse him hailing from Algeria and considering the *Eure département’s* climate.

They have a shower every morning and a bath once a week. Enough to overcome the natural sloppiness and untidiness of young boys driven to acquire the habits of piety, cleanliness, order and discipline. When they are not in class, they must not be left to themselves. Anyway, modern children do not know how to play or read anymore. When they are given free rein, the little ones play football. Too much football. Or they build huts. Frenetically. Which gives the surroundings of the house the unfortunate look of a 'village of savages'. Fortunately, they are cubs on Thursday afternoons and Sundays whenever there are no excursions. They learn to play an instrument: piano, violin and cello. They take part in workshops: drawing, modelling, engraving and leatherwork or carpentry, ironwork and gardening. There is also amateur dramatics, film shows, silent films at first, then talkies, concerts, reading sessions, talks on art, religion or the colonies and sport. Hence, not only football but also athletics, swimming, field hockey, tennis, basketball and even cricket.

Fernand is not among the first in class, but he is far from being a bad pupil. This is better besides, since the classes have to be cohesive in order to reap the maximum benefit from collective teaching. Exams are regular and repeating a year is frequent. He receives no prizes over the years, but he is mentioned in religious instruction, memorising and elocution, arithmetic, recitation and physical education.

Once in the sixth class, Fernand changes house and, joining the older boys, gets to know the house and school captains, as well as the committees that preside over collective life and prepare the 'Rocheux' for their responsibilities. He joins the founding house, Le Vallon, where the school captain is a boarder. Even there, the Garrones are in charge. At evening gatherings, Louis reads them *Capitaine Conan* or *Remorques* ('Trailers') by Roger VerceI. Loyalty, courage, daring and spirit of adventure.

Why would he be unhappy? He has got used to the place. His fellow pupils think him cheerful and a good comrade. The living conditions are comfortable, and the children are numerous enough to make friends. As for leisure activities, he is spoiled for choice and likes scouting.

Late mornings are devoted to modern languages, the practice of which is more than encouraged, it is promoted and celebrated. The school distinguishes itself by an unusual open-mindedness to the outside world and by the almost systematic sending of its pupils on language courses in England, Germany and Spain. A remarkable number of children have already lived abroad and speak a language other than French. These details are annotated next to the name in the pupils' register: next to Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle's name is the annotation: 'speaks Italian'.

Italian was spoken at home. Mama is Italian. Her name is Gianna Scorcia. But she is called Jeanne. Also, Papa was born in Rome, like his 11 brothers and sisters and like his own mother, Giustinnia, known as Justine.

It is in Florence, then in Rome that the Bonniers established themselves during the 1870s, after leaving Brittany in 1840, living in La Réunion for 25 years and passing through Mauritius, then Paris. The intrepid head of the family rewarded himself, once established in Italy, with a patronymic ornament: de la Chapelle and

with the title of baron. Monsieur Bonnier, Baron de la Chapelle, boasts of various distinctions and decorations, some more authentic than others. All welcome elements of respectability for someone who seems to live essentially on the confidence of others. His children's civil status varies according to the accidents of life: Bonnier for those who stayed behind in France and Bonnier de la Chapelle for those who lived in the Italian peninsula. The 'baron' will end his adventurous life in Barcelona, ruined for the last time.

Bonnier or Bonnier de la Chapelle remained French and, with each generation, a small number of them came to live in the mother country. Better still, they displayed a patriotic fibre enhanced by exile. Of the generation born in the 1850s, two boys were admitted to the military academy and became naval artillery officers. Lieutenant-Colonel Eugène Bonnier de la Chapelle was, in 1894, 'the conqueror of Timbuktu' and laid down his life. He gave his name to a village in Algeria, an Algerian boulevard and a square in Toulon. A commemorative monument was erected in Marseille to the memory of 'Colonel Bonnier', killed by the Tuaregs – an actual fate making for an idealised image.

His younger brother, Gaëtan, has been a general since 1908. At the end of a long career in the colonies, he was, before and after the Great War, senior commander of the Army of French West Africa. He was also the first French general to be awarded his flying pilot's certificate. Wounded twice at the front in 1914, he is what is called a rebel. His stubbornness had led him, against all opposition, to win recognition of his brother's role in Africa and the public honouring of his memory, amidst violent controversies and political quarrels. His bad character caused him to be removed from his command at the front in 1916, after long and bitter disputes with his superior officer, each accusing the other of 'killing his world'. He retained a fierce hatred of Marshal Foch and the recognition given to Marshal Pétain. The latter had shown him more kindness. His watchword, often repeated during his impoverished old age, will be: 'Better to be one's country's creditor than debtor'. The two Bonnier brothers are associated for posterity with a boulevard that bears their name in their birthplace of Saint-Leu in La Réunion.

Even if they did not choose the profession of arms, the Bonnier de la Chapelles came to France to do their military service. Titus, a consumptive, was soon declared unfit for service in 1911 and died two years later. There are two more brothers of fighting age in the Great War. Fernand, born in 1891, was finally declared unfit for service because of bone tuberculosis in 1917. Eugène joined up in January 1915, before Italy's entry into the war on the Allies' side, while he was still only 17 years old. He had the look mainly of a disguised adolescent, sporting a moustache to look older. He served in the infantry throughout the war, at the Saint-Mihiel salient, at Verdun, on the Somme and on several occasions in Champagne, where he was gassed in December 1915. In turn corporal, sergeant then officer cadet, he became a sub-lieutenant at 19. He will receive the Croix de Guerre with a star in May 1917 and the military Légion d'Honneur. He is the father of Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle.

He will be able to say, without exaggeration, that his son's childhood was soothed with the story of his ancestors' exploits and courage, which he listened to

with enthusiasm. He will insist that this little boy, whose blood is three-quarters Italian, definitely received a purely French education. Besides, he was born in France and lived there his whole life.

Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle was born in France, it is true. He was born on 1 November 1922 in Algiers, at a time when the city was the prefecture of a French department.

Immediately after the war, his parents married in Italy, where Eugène tried his hand at banking, following in the footsteps of his father's auditor. But, rather than linger in the Italy of the 'mutilated victory', of strikes, land seizures, political violence and military expeditions, the young couple leave at the end of 1921 to settle in Algiers, a new Mediterranean stopping place for this adventurous family. Apparently, Eugène first found a job as a mathematics teacher. To establish a position for themselves in this completely new place and environment, the young couple turned to the Italian colony. An old and large colony, which burgeoning fascist Italy is just beginning to take an interest in. Soon Eugène is giving language, then literature, lessons under the auspices of the Dante Society, the Italian cultural centre in Algiers. He becomes one of its pillars: *il signore Eugenio Bonnier de la Chapelle, professore di Lingua*.

He and his wife attend all the community's festivities and social life, preferably sponsored by the Italian consul or the Italian chamber of commerce: the national holiday, Christmas trees, New Year receptions, funeral service in memory of the queen mother, banquets, cocktail parties or tea parties in honour of the Italian aviators or liners calling in at Algiers. Eugène starts out in journalism by chronicling these respectable festivities, with a lot of exhaustive lists of personalities, guests and participants (including himself and his wife). At the end of 1925, he is appointed by the Governor-General of Algeria as a certified interpreter-translator of Italian. He is the person called upon to carry out administrative formalities and he helps litigants. Thus, he achieves a little bit of fame by being involved in some high-profile court cases. Mr. and Mrs. Bonnier de la Chapelle count among the Italian colony's prominent personalities. Perhaps at the time when he still had the long hair of a very young child, Fernand attended the 'child care beehive' sponsored by the Italian Ladies. Its inauguration under the aegis of Consul Sabetta and his wife was conscientiously reported by Eugène.

This community is, however, not their sole means of entry into society. From the second half of the twenties, they are actively involved in French charitable works such as Action for All (*l'Action pour tous*) and, in Gianna's case, the Secular Women's Mutual Assistance of Algiers (*l'Entraide féminine laïque d'Alger*), the Association of French Ladies (*l'Association des Dames françaises*) and the Maternity Charity (*l'Oeuvre de la maternité*), all very respectable associations, but non-religious and rather progressive.

Gianna, who had a calling as an artist, took up singing. She has lessons from the singer Rose Elsie, who after a career at the Opéra-Comique became a teacher at the Fine Arts Society of Algiers (*Société des Beaux-Arts d'Alger*), where she develops professional singers. Graduating in no time from the status of pupil to

disciple, Jeanne Bonnier de la Chapelle is a little local star, who appears at charity evenings and sometimes even on the airwaves of Radio Alger. 'Warm voice', 'mellow mezzo', 'marvellous style' and 'exquisite taste': the compliments rain down on this really very pretty young woman.

Eugène, too, has repositioned himself after his timid start as *L'Écho d'Alger's* gossip columnist. He has become editor of *La Dépêche Algérienne*, the other large circulation daily, which is generally considered the paragon of a moderate regional press, consensual to the point of being conventional, very respectful towards the public authorities and largely unpolitical. The newspaper presents itself as 'republican, national and social', 'ardent defender of the ideas of order and work' and 'read by everyone in Algeria'. It deals with everything, superficially and without ever upsetting anyone: politics – prudently – the economy, colonisation – fervently – literature, art, music and theatre, and it supplies news about metropolitan France and the world by making space for the press agencies' dispatches. In fairness, the freedom of the press in Algeria is much more restricted than in the mother country, forcing the newspapers to censor themselves, which determines their prosperity, indeed their survival.

There Eugène Bonnier de la Chapelle does all the jobs of a versatile editor, formatting the press agencies' reports and covering local news, with a predilection for descriptive and fitting stories of a stream of ceremonies, inaugurations, awards of decorations, parades, openings of Algeria's General Council (*Conseil Général*), arrivals and departures of official figures and merchant and naval vessels. This diversity explains why he can be described alternately as sports editor, economic journalist or shipping editor. He thus knows a lot of people, is known by a lot of people and is appreciated by his colleagues.

A success, then?

In 1928, Fernand enters the elementary school in the Rue Clauzel (he lives on the same street), then the little Lycée Mustapha, in the heart of the French quarter. Short hair, a lock of hair on his forehead, shorts, spiral socks and homemade sweater. No smock, no overall. This annexe of the lycée does not look like the Napoleonic barracks of the mother country. A little austere, the original building was extended with wings and terraces planted with fig plants. It is used for teaching and playing. Fernand learns to read and write, surrounded by little French boys like himself.

Later, the family lives at 8 Rue Tirman, very close to the city centre and the Agha railway station. It is practical, no doubt, enabling each to pursue their activities. What is the house like? How does this couple get along, being so busy together and separately? Do they argue or do they ignore each other? She is always pretty. He has put on weight, his hair is already going grey. The very handsome officer of the immediate post-war is but a memory. She has met another man, an artist, perhaps a dancer.

Fernand is 7, and everything comes to an end. Gianna leaves. His parents divorce, and his father is given custody because this little French boy must be

raised in France. But the custody is not intended to keep the boy. Eugène is already going to remarry. Fernand would be better off far away from all that, in a more temperate climate. He would be better off in the mother country, entrusted to his aunt Catherine and his uncle who is also called Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle. Eugène is very close to this older brother who has assumed the role of head of the family and has no children.

Little Fernand leaves Algiers and his parents. He is seven years old, and a new life begins.

The Bonniers are in the habit of talking of themselves as immigrants. 'Not bad for immigrants', they joke when they achieve success. 'Not bad for an immigrant', Uncle Fernand could really say in 1930, although this French immigrant did not leave with nothing.

The first Fernand, brother of the military students of the 1870s, had stayed in Italy. An auditor, he had a good career in various enterprises in the modern energy sector. Married to an Italian, he had 12 children, two of whom are Eugène, henceforth settled in Algiers, and Fernand, seven years older. As for the latter, he lives in Paris, where he brought his youngest child Gaston, not wanting to stay on in the new fascist Italy.

Imitating his uncles' example, this young Fernand had chosen to settle in France once he had passed his baccalaureate (taken, like his brothers, at the brand new French lycée in Rome), and in 1910, he sat the entrance exam for the École Polytechnique, for which he was eligible. The following year, he was finally accepted by the École des Mines. However, his mother's death in 1912 and his brother Titus's illness recall him brutally to the Italian capital. He enters the civil engineering school in Rome. The war comes. Being French, he is mobilised in August 1914. Officer cadet in the 11th artillery regiment at Grenoble, he is struck down by illness: Pott's disease, an infection of the vertebral column. He moves from military hospital to military hospital until his discharge in September 1917.

It is during his long convalescence in the Basque country that he meets a nurse in the military hospital at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Catherine Hetzel, the only daughter of Jules Hetzel, he himself the son of Pierre-Jules Hetzel, the publisher of Jules Verne of course, but also of Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Balzac, Baudelaire and George Sand. If he did not exactly follow in his father's literary footsteps, Jules Hetzel did chair the *Cercle de la Librairie* and was one of the kingpins of the Paris Universal Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900. In 1914, he sold the Hetzel bookshop to the publisher Hachette, which in no way stopped the founder's cult from being piously kept alive in the family, where his books and precious archives are preserved.

Catherine and Fernand married in April 1918. She very much in love, and he very attractive. A marriage contract records the difference in their wealth: comfortable for her and non-existent for him. They live in the Hetzel family's residences: at 12 Rue des Saints-Pères in the sixth arrondissement of Paris and, in the summer months, at 2 Rue Emmanuel-Giraud in Sèvres, where Pierre-Jules had entrusted the

making of an over-ornate villa to Viollet-le-Duc (he was the latter's publisher). In this vast 'bird estate' situated on the heights of the aptly named Bellevue, Hetzel had received the greatest names in literature. The whole family gathers there every Sunday for lunch.

A consultant engineer specialising in the field of electricity and electrical equipment, Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle gains a fine professional position in the 1930s, which supplements Catherine's wealth. Chairman of an electricity company (in an age when all of them were private) and founder of Lampes Néotron, he sits on the board of several French and foreign companies, including the Banque Italo-Française de Crédit and the Omnium Africain des Pétroles. A member of various chambers of commerce, he is appointed under the Popular Front government as an adviser to the Ministry of External Trade by a Radical-Socialist minister, keen to be informed as much as possible about developments in Mussolini's Italy. He has abandoned the practice of religion, vigorously maintained by his sisters Elisa, Pia and Giuseppina, who have remained in Italy. He claims – wrongly – that he is a freemason.

Catherine is a woman mentioned a little in society gossip, mixes in polite society, dresses well and is seen where it is fashionable to be seen. The 'de la Chapelle' particle, invented in Italy, creates the agreeable illusion of nobility.

Fernand, their nephew, is thus welcomed into an atmosphere quite different from the one he was born into. He was the son of a young, petit bourgeois couple from a city in far-off French North Africa – even if the city was the main one. From now on, he lives in the capital of a great European power, with people in their 40s, very well-off, or even wealthy, and possessing solid cultural and social capital. His Aunt Catherine's niece, Alexandra, known as Olesia Sienkiewicz, is married to Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, already famous as a writer. Although he finds it a chore, Drieu is present at the Sunday lunches in the house at Sèvres. Everybody there finds him charming and very easy-going. He likes and respects his father-in-law, a luckless banker, admires his musical mother-in-law and is enchanted by his two young sisters-in-law. But stay married to Olesia for that reason?

Fernand slips into the clothes of a model child, the darling of his aunt's friends. He is really nice and so well brought up. He has swapped the little lycée in Algiers for what is the smartest of private establishments: the École des Roches, afterwards the Dominican school, Lacordaire, a château situated on a delightful site between Sèvres and Bellevue, and lastly the Collège Stanislas where he will sit the first part of his baccalaureate in October 1938, before he is even 16. He has become a very tall adolescent with, on his chin, the dimple of the men in his family. He keeps his curled hair under control. He wears generous-sized suits, stiff collars and ties. He smokes. He spends time at car rallies.

Fernand and Catherine Bonnier de la Chapelle, though determined to give their nephew a comfortable life and an excellent education, are a little more sparing with their signs of affection. The uncle is very reserved and inspires respect. The aunt has nothing maternal about her at first sight. She is serious to the point of austerity.

A fervent Catholic, she has taken it upon herself to accept her brother-in-law's divorce and remarriage to a young Jewish woman. She is in contact with both the first and second wives. She does so for Fernand's sake. He sees little of his mother. Yet he obviously adores her.

Fernand hides his youthful excitement and his great need for affection behind the appearance of a wise boy, a model pupil and a scout, always prepared. But his uncle and aunt have grown used to him, and they end up seeing in him the son they never had. They become his adoptive parents. They are brimming with pride, but their love appears stiff if Uncle Fernand dares to express his feelings.

In these different private educational establishments, he has been noticed for the precociousness of his judgement, his physical and moral courage, his flexible and quick intelligence. He knew, when required, how to assume responsibilities, sometimes heavy for his age and, once his decision was taken, he carried it out and stayed the course with firmness, without fearing the consequences.

The affection did not embellish the portrait too much. At the Collège Stanislas, the young Bonnier de la Chapelle is appreciated by his teachers, despite his inclination to amateurishness. He is thought quite intelligent and even sufficiently gifted to justify – or nearly – his pretensions to make a name for himself. For the time being, it is in the hope of getting him into the military academy that his uncle has chosen Stanislas, on the advice of friends who have followed the same path.

Fernand sees his father and his new family during their holidays in France. They have to synchronise dates, because his uncle and aunt are not slouches, travelling nearly everywhere in France and even England, where they have a lot of friends. Moreover, the pilgrimages to Italy are occasions for large-scale family reunions for all the Bonniers. But it is in the Dordogne that Fernand acquires his most beautiful holiday memories, starting with his first romances.

What can Fernand do with his holidays, a single child in the large house at Sèvres? Play, of course, and read too. With his father, a great supplier of books, he was already in good hands. But in his Aunt Catherine's house, he has only an embarrassment of choice amid the innumerable volumes of the Hetzel collection. Pierre-Jules Hetzel was the first French publisher to publish so much for children, and for generations, his works were *par excellence* reasonably priced books for Christmas and New Year presents.

He can read everything by Jules Verne: *Two Years of Holiday (Deux ans de vacances)*, whose heroes are separated from their family like him; *Hector Servadac, Robur the Conqueror (Robur le Conquérant)*, *Mathias Sandorf* and *Clovis Dardentor*, which all take place in his native Algeria. He can admire the tales by Perrault, illustrated by Gustave Doré. He can enjoy *The Silver Skates (Les patins d'argent)* or *Maroussia*, the novels by Stahl, Hetzel's pen name when he was a writer. He can be touched by college life in Daudet's *Little Chose (Le petit Chose)*