

The Homogeneous Representation of *Les Tondues* as Sexual Collaborators and its Impact upon the French *Récit Nationale*

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This essay examines the representation of *Les Tondues*, women whose heads were shaved following the second world war, primarily in France, as punishment for collaboration. The general consensus is that these women were punished for sexual collaboration and romantic relationships with German soldiers. This is true in only 42% cases. This essay seeks to explain why the lasting myth of French collaboration is of *collaboration horizontale*, to query why these women were chosen as the target for public rancour, and to examine how the circulation of these photographs has coloured the national and international conception of the French *récit national* of collaboration.

In the eighteen months following the liberation of France, approximately 20,000 women had their heads shaved as a punitive measure (117, *Edith Thomas: A Passion for Resistance*). Their crime: collaboration. Images of *la tonte* have come to globally symbolise the liberation of France from the evils of the Vichy regime. Furthermore, they contain within the implicit understanding that the form of this collaboration for which they were being punished was sexual. Thus, this is the lasting Gaullist myth regarding collaboration in France under Vichy, of a collaboration which was the work of a small number of disenfranchised individuals and weak, submissive women. This was corroborated both directly by interested parties such as French heads of state up until the 1990's, and indirectly via the reproduction of these images, proliferated incessantly by sensationalist historical accounts of the period. However, the reality is far more complex, more nuanced and

much darker. These women's collaboration was only one of many forms, and arguably the most innocent as it likely had the least impact upon the result of the war. Even amongst the women who had their heads shaved there was a variation in their forms of "collaboration"; ranging from sexual to economic to political. Regardless, these oddly sexualised and voyeuristic images still influence our conception of collaboration under the Vichy regime, coded as they are with certain assumptions. This essay will seek to reveal which of these many assumptions are misguided, to answer why these women were chosen as the target for public rancour, and to examine how the circulation of these photographs has coloured the national and international conception of the French *récit national* of collaboration.

First, let us look at the wider image of France under the Vichy regime, to paint a picture of the reality of collaboration. Contrary to the Gaullist myth, collaboration was widespread and multiform. A new government, led by Maréchal Petain, a proto-fascist, collaborated on economic, political and military levels. For example, because of the *Service Obligatoire du Travail*, by February 1943, 900,000 French were at work in German factories, contributing to the German war effort (127, *FRD's Ambassadors and the Diplomacy of Crisis*). France was the third largest supplier of labour, after Russia and Poland. Furthermore, the *Statut des juifs* was introduced on the third of October 1940, which ensured the exclusion of Jewish people from public office, a purely French initiative (83, *The Politics of War Trauma*). Similarly, the French government was complicit in the deportation of 42,000 Jews in 1942 (229, *The Coming of the Holocaust*). On an ideological and military level, by 1943 a French SS Brigade existed and there were between 40,000 and 50,000 French men in German uniform (72, *The French at War*). On a smaller scale, many people amongst the general population could be considered petty collaborators, due to the figures concerning denunciation, the act of reporting fellow citizens to the German authorities. We can see clearly that the reality of French collaboration does not match up with that which de Gaulle presented to the world during the Liberation. Comparative to the above figures, there were approximately 80,000 Franco-German babies born during and after the war (27, *Collaboration and Resistance in Occupied France*). Why then, is the primary conception of war time collaboration that of sexual relationships between submissive, young women and domineering French soldiers?

Let us move to examine *les tondues* themselves to sort the instances of *collaboration horizontale* from those unisex forms of collaboration already referenced. As above mentioned, while the common assumption is that the *tondues* were exclusively "collaboratrices horizontales", women who had

emotional and sexual relationships with German soldiers, this is far from the truth. In fact, per Virgili in his text *La France "Virile"*, of those women who had their heads shaved, only 42.1% were accused of sexual relationships with German soldiers. 14.6% were accused of economic collaboration (he outlines an example in which a French waitress is offered the equivalent salary of a policeman in service for 28 years, a tempting prospect for anyone, particularly in the context of the enormous difficulties of wartime living). 6.5% were accused of denunciation, 8% of political or military collaboration and 26.7% of "undetermined collaboration" (23). Why then this fascination with sexual relationships? Perhaps due to the gendered nature of their crime. No man was ever brought up on charges of sexual collaboration during or after the war. Perhaps also because sex is considered marginally more interesting than economics and politics. These two aspects combined, rendered *la tonte* the perfect spectacle, which created an ideal distraction from the ugliness of the now obsolete Vichy France, which both the *résistants de septembre* and resistance leaders wished to leave in the past, the former in the interest of self-preservation and the latter in interest of the portrayal of the French under the Vichy regime as universally resistant and in keeping with the post-war politics of the winning side. The Gaullist myth was far preferable to the reality of an anti-Semitic, right-wing Vichy government which did not fail in taking initiative in the persecution of French Jews. But this does not tell us, why were these women the target of such anger and hatred, in complete disproportion to the extent of influence which this relatively innocent form of collaboration had on the outcome of the war?

As previously mentioned, the practice of *la tonte* is interesting due to its entirely gender-specific nature. In a country as misogynistic as France in the early nineteenth century, it is little wonder that it was a select group of women who became the target of an entire humiliated nation's hostility. There are some obvious explanations for this. Relationships were often a very visible form of collaboration. Women sat on terraces with soldiers on the *terrasse* were in plain view. This was even considered an act of propaganda. Furthermore, people were jealous of the perks which these women were perceived to receive, extra food beyond war time rations and even luxuries such as perfume and stockings. And finally, these women were obviously a far more vulnerable target than the soldiers themselves. However, there are some far more subtle, insidious reasons for the extent to which the public were furious with these women. Per Virgili "head-shaving was not the punishment for sexual collaboration, but rather the punishment for gendered collaboration" (58, *Virile*) This is unarguably true, based on

evidence already cited above. However, contemporary general assumption is that *la tonte* was the punishment for sexual collaboration. This is a result of the sexual nature of *la tonte* and the varying punishments which accompanied it. On the subject, we must look first at the female body as a metaphor for France itself and the implications which this had for Franco-German relationships, and then the sexualised and voyeuristic nature of this form of punishment.

Numerous authors have theorised upon the reason for the extent and enthusiasm with which these women were punished. Alison M. Moore attributes it to their “crime of having represented the military penetration of the French nation by Germany, via the passive reception of the German phallus into the French female body” (660, ‘History, Trauma and Memory in Photography of the Tondues’). Virgili writes “It was heard that German soldiers had poured champagne over the head of a young, naked woman and the soldiers licked from her body the flowing champagne. How can one fail to see, in this anecdote, the pornographic metaphor of a country invaded by a raping and pillaging enemy” (57, *Virile*). We must mention the significance of the personification of France as the female figure of Marianne, “a semi-bare-breasted virgin, draped in white cloth as depicted in the 1830 painting by Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*” (660 ‘HM&T’) for the thorough understanding of this citation. This implies that the country of France itself is a woman’s body, which begins to give more sense to Virgili’s above words, as the metaphor of the rape and pillage is carried out literally on the bodies of the female population of France. Moreover, sleeping with the Germans was conceived as so abominable a crime for an array of reasons with their bases in the fundamental misogyny of mid-twentieth century France. The sexual jealousy of French men returning home from the front to find that women had not preserved them their favours. The predominant view of women as entirely passive, submissive creatures. The lack of understanding regarding female sexuality. Much of the rhetoric of the time surrounds the passive role of these women in their relationships with “les Boches”, emphasising this failure to regard women as nuanced creatures who often had strong motivations behind these relationships.

Why was *la tonte* chosen as a punishment for these women? The shaving of women’s heads possesses a biblically sexual significance. The hair has been, theologically speaking, considered the most seductive aspect of a woman. Shaving of the head was traditionally a punishment for adultery, an attempt to desexualise the woman who had committed the act. While this was not necessarily the logic of those who decided on said punishment,

we must nonetheless question whether they subconsciously believed that some form of adultery had occurred. And was it France herself who was betrayed? Or her male population? The answers to these questions lie once again in the deep misogyny of France at the time. However, they do explain why this sexualised form of punishment was chosen. Addressing the blatantly voyeuristic and sexual nature of performances of *la tonte*, in addition to the biblical significance, we need only examine one or two examples of photography of *la tonte*. A quick Google search will produce not only images of glassy-eyed women, having large bunches of their hair systematically shorn off, but several infinitely more disturbing images, of women stripped to their underwear or entirely naked, and paraded about the streets, sometimes on the back of trucks, in obvious distress. These women also often had swastikas daubed onto their foreheads or bare breasts, were beaten, or were covered in tar. It is not difficult to deduce that these punishments were of a perverse nature. However, it must be noted that events of this sort were not commonplace. According to Virgili, "Stripping of women was the result of individual initiatives in which voyeurism and sadism combined, facilitated by the overt sexualisation of the *collaboratrices*" (242, *Virile*).

The general reaction to such extreme examples of *la tonte* was a combination of disgust and morbid curiosity. These more extreme examples of barbarity are uncommon and the circulation of said photographs, comparatively few in contrast to images of the typical *tonte* which exist in archives, may be accounted for by the sensationalism of the photos, leading to their popular dissemination. According to Moore "the generalised post-war fetishisation of female bodies (promoted through advertising, women's magazines, popular film, etc.) means that such images have an automatic voyeuristic currency that allows for their ubiquitous reproduction" (659, 'HT&M'). Along with the above-mentioned arguments, on closer examination of the surrounding crowds, usually primarily consisting of men, they are visibly smiling and laughing, exulting in the misery and humiliation of these women. First-hand accounts tell us that these events, the exercising of civilian justice, were considered almost like carnival days, and women and children were both also present. The photos are so very bizarre for this exact reason, the juxtaposition of these shocking images, with this fairground atmosphere.



Figure 1: A victim of la tonte kneels before a crowd in a village in Marseille.

Fig. 1 is a typical example of a *tondue* photo. A woman, head shaved, weeping kneels on the ground, surrounded primarily by men, although there are some awestruck children to the right foreground. The men in an arch around said woman are smiling, and proffering their guns. One cannot help but interpret a sexual undertone in this phallic gesture and the placing of the woman on her knees, submissive to the will of the men who surround.

We turn now to examine the way the selection and dissemination of *tondue* photography has shaped both the French and the international conception of collaboration. Moore writes “the selective and repetitious use of *tondue* photographs in representing French collaboration has supported a reductive mythologization of the Nazi Occupation of France.” (658, ‘HM&T’) In this manner, she compares it to reproduced images of the Holocaust as in both cases these images serve to create a single narrative of victimisation. By creating said homogeneous narrative, it both serves to deny the varying experiences of trauma and to influence the common understanding of the reasons behind this punishment. This is further carried out by the lack of testimonials from shorn women. Moore states that this lack of existing testimonials of the women photographed deprives us of a counter balance to our interpretation of these images. The photographs and video footage of the events are silent. We have very little information

regarding the experiences and the feelings of the women themselves, and the extent to which this has impacted them in later life. Alain Brossat in his 1992 *Les tondues: Un carnaval moche*, describes his reluctance to interview these women, and to reopen old wounds, discouraged from doing so by his companion, pointing out that their children may know nothing of their mother's past. (18, *Carnaval*) A notable exception to this lack of testimonials is the 2007 documentary, *Tondues en 44*. This documentary provides fascinating insights into the experiences of multiple women who had their heads shaved during the Liberation. Immediately we see that not all experiences of *la tonte* were identical. For example, in some instances, it was carried out in private, which for obvious reasons is not represented in the narrative of *la tonte*, largely informed by visual images. One woman, under the pseudonym of Marie, is interviewed with her back to the camera, as she wishes to remain anonymous. This, combined with Brossat's reluctance to dig up the past reveals the extent to which shame is still felt by some of these women, despite the general change in perception of *les tondues* from traitors to victims and the simultaneous change as the *tondeurs* came to be viewed as cowards rather than heroes.

Despite the existence of *Tondues en 44*, as above stated, this homogenous narrative of the sexual collaborator is still prevalent, built upon by cultural representations. For example, let us take *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, the 1969 documentary film by Marcel Ophuls, which according to Moore "links the *tondues* to sexual collaboration by situating documentary footage of a *tonte* ritual in Paris alongside interviews with inhabitants of Clermont-Ferrand in which he asks them how they felt seeing French girls on the arms of German soldiers in the street." (668, 'HT&M') This is an example of the development of this idea of sexual collaboration as the exclusive reason for the punishment of women during the Liberation period. Other examples in film include *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Le vieil homme et l'enfant*. Similarly, in Henri Amouroux's *La grande histoire des Français sous l'occupation*, an image of a *tondue* is captioned with, 'A collabo horizontale after ritual punishment in Gisors'. Moore questions foundations on which Amouroux has based the claim that her crime was sexual collaboration. Did he simply assume, as so many are wont to do, when confronted by a black and white image of a woman having her head shaved? While scholarly articles do the work of accurately revealing the truth, it is popularised images which ultimately have the most weight in universal understanding. Popular history and films have done most of this work, and built upon this romanticised and sensational archetype of *la collaboratrice horizontale* for 50 years. While the aim of these films is not necessarily to drive viewers to the belief that all collaboration

was sexual, it nonetheless has this effect. It would require a whole new type of cinema to transform our understanding, whose creation is a highly improbable, because this archetype of the *tondue* punished for a sexual relationship makes excellent fodder for the entertainment industry whereas a film about a woman's denunciation of her neighbour and eventual shaving, is unlikely to draw much interest.

Thus, we have drawn several conclusions. Firstly, we can see that the heavily emphasised idea that collaboration was a purely female and sexual activity is false. Both men and women were guilty of collaboration on a varying scale. Amongst the women, there were multiple forms of collaboration exercised and less than half of those who had their heads shaved were accused of sexual collaboration. The invention of the archetype of collaborator as the *collaboratrice horizontale* nonetheless exists. It has been promoted both directly and indirectly by interested parties and sensationalist media. The presentation of collaboration as perpetrated exclusively by submissive women had obvious benefits for the French government directly following the war, considering France's weakened position in international politics. Furthermore, it is undeniable that gender and sexuality have a role to play in the spectacle of *la tonte*. France at the time was a deeply misogynistic country, which accounts somewhat for the targeting of women during the liberation. It led to a deep rage, particularly amongst the male population of France, the result of sexual jealousy. The taking as lovers of German men by French women was viewed as a betrayal and a humiliation to France in general, as these women's bodies, to a certain extent, came to represent France itself. We have seen that *la tonte* had sexual undertones as a punishment, a punishment for adultery, for the betrayal of France. This is further supported by more explicitly sexual and extreme versions of *la tonte* but these were not the norm. Finally, the popular reproduction of images of *la tonte* has had an enormous influence on the common perception of collaboration under Vichy. The homogenous representation of *la tondue* as a sexual collaborator has further supported the idea that this was the primary form of collaboration. We can therefore see that *la tonte* is another of many episodes which contribute to the theorisation of the existence of a tailor-made French *récit national* and the denial of some of the uglier moments in French history. If the common perception remains that collaboration was primarily a sexual act committed by weak and detested women, an injustice is done to the memory of these women, many still alive and still living with shame.

This will not change until open and honest discussion of the truth occurs, which would serve to destigmatise *les tondues* and place blame where it belongs: on those collaborators who chose to contribute to the Vichy regime due to their own ideological views or merely because they felt that when the war ended, they would be on the winning side.

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