



# The Plague: Part Three



Part Three of *The Plague* is a one-chapter section chronicling the intensification of the disease. It is a central pivot point for the novel.

The two stand-alone activities help meet Saskatchewan's English B30 curriculum indicators.

- **Historical Context: Life in Occupied France** deepens the understanding of the historical and political factors that shaped *The Plague*.
- **Historical Context: Antisemitism in France** deepens the understanding of the discrimination in Vichy France.



Both these activities and the chapter questions are key for building understandings of how allegories work, and some of their limits as a literary technique. As well, these activities add to the understandings of how Camus' experiences shaped *The Plague*.



## Part Three • Chapter 1

// Our fellow-citizens had fallen into line, adapted themselves as people say, to the situation, because there was no way of doing otherwise //

(148)

*Oran enters a phase of depression and pain as the plague intensifies.*

1. The plague is especially deadly for people who live in groups. Prisons are particularly hard-hit, partly because prisoners cannot socially distance.
  - a) Why does the narrator suggest the situation in the prisons is “impartial justice” (140)?
  - b) Do you agree? Is the situation in prisons impartial justice?
2.
  - a) How do funerals change with the plague’s intensification?
  - b) Is it reasonable that “sentiments can’t be taken into account” (143) when dealing with funerals?





Facing defeat in Metropolitan France (the area of France on the European continent), the French had three main options available in June 1940. One option was to continue the fight from their



colonial lands in northern Africa. Another option was to take up an offer from the United Kingdom to form a political union with France, and continue the fight together as one country. However, most of France's leaders came to believe that they should take a third option: sign an armistice agreement with Germany. This would allow for some return to a normal life, and opened the possibility of returning France's prisoners of war.

The armistice agreement divided France in two—the German-occupied north (*Zone Occupée*) and the French-controlled south (*Zone libre*). For many, giving Germany virtual control of the north was a better option than continuing with war. While the armed battle between France and Germany came to an end, the armistice agreement did not return life to normal.

One of the many problems created was the separation of people. *The Plague* touches on this separation when it points out that “the chief source of distress, the deepest as well as the most widespread, was separation”(148). French citizens were separated by the Demarcation Line: the border between the north and the south. Citizens could not freely move across this border. Permission was required.



Vichy's President Philippe Pétain meets Adolf Hitler, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1940. This photo is often seen to reinforce the belief that Vichy was a willing Nazi collaborator.

Meanwhile, prisoners of war remained separated from their home and family, despite promises in the armistice agreement to bring POWs home. Germany would sometimes exchange POWs for French workers, but this did not end separation: it merely switched who was being separated. Healthy young workers would be shipped to Germany in exchange for sickly soldiers. As well, French prisoners were sometimes shipped to Germany. The net effect was that by the end of World War II, two million French citizens were being held in Germany, half a million more than when the armistice was signed.

Camus personally felt the effects of separation. In mid-November 1942, Allied forces seized Morocco and Algeria, two of Vichy France's colonial holdings in northern Africa. Hitler now faced Allies across the English Channel to the north, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south. He immediately broke the armistice agreement, marched south, and took military control of all of France.

For Camus, the timing of the Allied invasion of Algeria was terrible. At the time, Camus was living in France's Massif Central mountains. His doctor believed the fresh air would help curb his periodic bouts of tuberculosis, so he moved there to work on *The Plague*. Unfortunately, his second wife Francine Faure had just left France for Algeria. Camus planned to join her at the end of November. With Algeria in Allied hands, the two could not visit or even write each other. On the day of the German invasion of the south, Camus wrote “caught like rats” in his notebook.

## Shortages and Regulations

In addition to human separation, shortages and regulations plagued people living in France. Just like in Oran of *The Plague*,

So much energy was expended on filling up forms, hunting round for supplies, and queueing up, that people had no time to think of the manner in which others were dying around them and they themselves would die one day. (144)

As the war dragged on, these realities became progressively worse.

The Vichy government was perpetually stretched for resources, due in part to the general circumstances of war, and due in part to the armistice agreement. France agreed to pay Germany for their occupying army in the north. This drained the government of money, leaving it unable to buy up resources for the French people.

Even if the French government had the money to buy goods for its citizens, the war halted most international trade. This left France largely dependent upon whatever domestic production was not confiscated by Germany. With shortages of most basic goods, the French were forced to use rationing cards. Meanwhile, many farmers sold food at inflated prices on the black market.

Communications were also highly regulated. All news was subjected to strict censorship. As well, listening to the BBC was illegal, because they were broadcasting programs and coded messages for the French.

Even interpersonal communication was highly regulated. At the beginning of the occupation, people could not send letters from the north to south and vice-versa. Instead, a special 13-line card was to be used, and only for communicating with family members. People checked off words such as “in good health” and “no news of.” Letter-writing rules were progressively relaxed, however.



Charles de Gaulle, speaking from BBC Broadcasting House in central London. Exiled governments from across Europe, including France, often used the BBC to send radio messages to their home countries.

Meanwhile, just like how “the establishment of a curfew hour” (141) happened in Oran, France was put under a curfew. The curfew time often changed—sometimes daily in the case of curfews for Jews—in an effort to confuse the population.

After sunset, both Oran and France were “plunged in complete darkness” (141). Turning off lights conserved scarce energy. However, in war-ravaged France turning off the lights was also done for military reasons: if French cities were in complete darkness, Allied bombers would have difficulties finding their targets.

For the people of Paris in particular, the darkness was a foreign concept. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Paris became known as The City of Light. This was due in part to its well-lit streets at night. Paris embarked upon a street-lighting program in the 1800s to improve its reputation. The belief then was that the nighttime darkness of cities contributed to their seediness and immorality.



## Persecution and Death

When *The Plague* says that “people were dying all around them” (144), this also is an allegory for France. Over half a million French civilians and soldiers died during World War II. This includes an estimated 70,000 French civilians who died from Allied bombing efforts during the occupation. One group at particular risk during the occupation were resisters. If somebody was caught in an act of resistance, the Nazis and their Vichy collaborators showed no mercy.

In Occupied France, it was a taboo to harm occupying German military officers. If harm came to them, retribution was swift and lopsided. This harsh approach dampened the resistance, because harming a German officer led to even greater suffering for people not involved in the attack.

A famous example of this system of injustice took place in the northwestern French city of Nantes in 1941. Three communist Resisters shot and killed a German naval officer. The shooting was to avenge the arrest and killing of two young communists who attended an anti-German rally in Paris.

Almost immediately, the Vichy government sentenced six communist prisoners to death by a *sections spéciales* court. Vichy set up these courts in 1941 to prosecute communists and anarchists, as a form of martial law. The *sections spéciales* courts could only give one of three possible penalties for those found guilty: life imprisonment, hard labour, or death. Appeals were not allowed and sentences were to be carried out immediately.

### What is Martial Law?

Martial law is a form of rule that suspends normal laws. The military is given permission by the government to enforce order.

Despite the killing of six communists, Hitler was not satisfied with Vichy’s response. He ordered that 50 French prisoners—reflecting a broad swath of French society—be shot immediately, along with another 50 if the officer’s killers were not found in two days. Almost immediately, 48 prisoners were shot and killed.

An effort to halt the second round of executions quickly sprung up. Nantes’ mayor and bishop, and even Vichy’s leader Marshall Pétain, urged that the second round not go ahead.

In an effort to stop the executions, something else particularly unusual happened. 5,000 residents of Nantes pivoted into a show of solidarity with the Germans, solemnly following the dead officer’s coffin at his funeral procession. Just as the narrator says in *The Plague*, “Our fellow-citizens had fallen into line, adapted themselves, as people say, to the situation, because there was no way of doing otherwise” (149). With the lives of 50 fellow citizens in immediate danger, the people of Nantes fell into line, attempting to show the Germans their goodwill and fealty.

Hitler was satisfied, and the second round of killings did not go ahead. Nevertheless, the message was sent. There would be a high cost for direct acts of resistance, and those costs would be spread across French society.

## To Resist?

Just like *Y. pestis* in *The Plague*, the Nazis and their collaborators proved themselves to be a “shrewd, unflagging adversary; a skilled organizer, doing his work thorough and well” (148) This is not to say that they were doing honourable work: it is only to say that they were ruthlessly smart in how they approached their task. Nazis and their collaborators made life in occupied France an experience of suffering. Separation, shortages, regulations, and the risk of death were all realities.

Even though the Nazis were skilled, history has shown that they could be stopped. The military might of the Allies, alongside the forces of the French Resistance, were able to push back this *peste brune*. But it was not an easy task.

## Discuss

1. Choose any situation or idea in Part Three Chapter 1 that could be an allegory for the Nazi occupation.
  - a) What direct connections between the fictional situation and occupation can you find?
  - b) In what ways does the situation not quite apply to the occupation?
  - c) What do these similarities and differences tell us about the uses and limits of allegories?
2. Choose any situation or idea in Part Three Chapter 1, perhaps in the last few pages, and compare it to living through COVID-19.

<sup>1</sup> Sean B. Carroll. *Brave Genius*, Broadway Books, 2013, p. 157.



## Historical Context

# Antisemitism in France

Many people suffered during France's occupation. Some people, like members of the Communist Party, suffered more than the average person. However, one group of people suffered more than most anybody else: France's Jewish population.

Recall that the narrator of *The Plague* claims that "Plague had levelled out discrimination" (149). This is scientifically true, in the way *Y. pestis* can infect a society. As Dr. Nicholas Christakis points out, during a full-blown *Y. pestis* epidemic, "social distinctions cease to matter." At this point, there is no hiding from plague: it attacks everyone equally and indiscriminately. This can be seen in the storyline in *The Plague*.

However, the narrator's claim about levelled-out discrimination does not quite hold up as an allegory for what was happening in World War II France. In particular, Jews were being aggressively singled out. This was a dramatic change.

## Jewish People in France during World War II

Interwar France was perhaps Europe's most welcoming nation for Jews. By 1940, 350,000 Jewish people lived in France. About half were French citizens. Many others were permanent residents. And a significant portion were refugees, people who found themselves without a safe state once the Nazis began their takeover of Germany and later Europe. The Jewish community gained prominence in France's legal, medical, financial, and arts communities. In fact, a Jewish person—Léon Blum—became France's Prime Minister in 1936.

When Germany occupied France's north, many Jews escaped to the south. *Zone libre* was considered safer because it still was free of Nazis. Those who wanted to join the French Resistance went to Toulouse or Lyon, hotbeds of the movement. Many others fled to a small area around Nice occupied by Italy, because Italy did not have a Jewish persecution policy.

All the same, wherever Jews went in France they faced discrimination. In fact, the Vichy government, shortly after taking power, quickly passed a series of antisemitic laws that in some ways were worse than Germany's antisemitic laws. This would mark the first time since the French Revolution that France would create laws that singled out a particular religion.

At first, some Vichy operatives cast their plans for antisemitic legislation—*Statut des Juifs* (Jewish Law)—as something that was only intended to target foreign-born Jews living in France. French Jewish citizens, so their narrative went, would be safe. This approach played into nationalist sentiments of the time, casting non-citizens as people less worthy of rights.

Even the law's name could give the impression that it was about foreign-born Jews. Since the nineteenth century, the French Jewish community self-identified as *israélite*, because *juif* had become a derogatory term in France. However, the law did not make a distinction between foreign-born and French Jews. Its implementation was sometimes uneven, but the law applied to all Jewish people in France.



The first laws came into effect in October 1940. Jews were barred from the army, the civil service, the press, and other jobs where they could influence public opinion. As well, Jews were excluded from using financing or credit, effectively leaving them unable to own a business. Further, several thousand Jews were stripped of citizenship. In Algeria in particular, all Jewish people lost their French citizenship, becoming redefined as “Native Jews.” In June 1941, a second round of laws were passed. Professions such as doctors and lawyers were limited to 2% Jewish membership. Jewish property was confiscated by the French government. And Jews were banned from places like the theatre and subjected to an early curfew.

Adding to the problems for French Jews, a June 1942 Nazi decree required Jews in the occupied north to wear a yellow Star of David in public. Meanwhile, Jewish people—first foreign-born, then some French

citizens—were being rounded up. They were either housed in French detention camps or sent to Germany, as Nazis were demanding quotas of Jews. As legal scholar Vivian Grosswald Curran summarised it, Jews “became progressively hemmed in by increasing numbers of laws depriving them of their rights to property, freedom, and, finally, to life itself.”<sup>2</sup> Because Jewish people had no safe state that would take them in, their fate was largely determined by the governments of the countries where they resided.

Amid this darkness, there are countless stories of heroic French individuals. Many people were kind to Jews, helped them live, helped them hide, and helped them escape. For that matter, by 1943 French officials became less willing to deport Jews to Germany. By that point, most Jews left in France were French citizens and the government was less willing to deport its own citizens. Nevertheless, the French State—like so many countries of the era—has a dark historical record of antisemitism. Nearly 80,000 Jews living in France died, some in French detention centres but most in German death camps. Of those killed, one-third were French citizens.



The *Statut des Juifs* made it obligatory for all Jewish-owned businesses to post a declaration of their owner’s religion. Singling out people in such a negative way created “others,” and undermined the idea of our shared humanity.

## Camus and Jewish People

In many ways, what happened in France was a continuation of a centuries-old history of scapegoating minorities—including Jews—during times of crisis such as plagues. Camus was well-aware of this historical tendency to persecute minorities in times of crisis. When creating *The Plague*, he wrote in his notebook

1342 – The Black Death in Europe. The Jews are murdered.

1481 – the plague ravages the South of Spain. The Inquisition says: The Jews.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these notes, *The Plague* is not heavily invested in allegorically exploring the specific plight facing Jews in occupied France. The book can be read as a broader, shared human experience of fear living under Nazi occupation.

That understood, Camus was very familiar with and participated in the Jewish experience. He was close friends with several Algerian Jews, even having taught French to Jewish children for a short time prior to the war. When the occupation began and Vichy passed its antisemitic laws, he wrote to a Jewish friend,

All of this is particularly unjust and despicable... but you need to know that those untouched by the law are not indifferent. I vow to hold fast to everything we hold in common. I will never tire of saying this as long as it remains necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Camus' actions during the occupation showed him to be true to these words.

In 1942, Camus lived in a small mountain village as he wrote some of *The Plague*. It was only two kilometres from Le Chambon, the area's centre of nonviolent resistance. In fact, several Jews were hidden in the same boarding house where Camus resided. During this time, Camus often dined with a

Jewish French Algerian named André Chouraqui. Chouraqui was active in the Resistance, and spent hours talking with Camus about the plague and its significance in the Hebrew Bible. Chouraqui told Camus biographer Patrick Henry that when it came to local resistance activities, "Of course Camus knew everything that was going on."<sup>5</sup> When Camus left the mountain village for Paris, part of his resistance efforts included helping a Jewish woman escape to Le Chambon.

### **"Outsiders" and Disease**

Perceived "outsiders" have long been treated as responsible for outbreaks of disease, contrary to facts.

For example, a suspected case of *Y. pestis* in San Francisco in March 1900 led to the complete lockdown of Chinatown and the forced inoculation of residents—except for white residents, who were allowed to leave.

Likewise, a 1924 outbreak in Los Angeles led to the quarantine and destruction of 2,500 homes, mostly of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Hebrew University of Jerusalem professor David Ohana sums up Camus' role during the occupation by saying that his "conduct towards Jews in the war was exceptional and impressive, and he endangered his life more than once."<sup>6</sup>

While *The Plague* is not strictly focussed on Jewish experiences during the Occupation, Camus later wrote a novel that explored the moral and ethical challenges that the Holocaust in particular presented. His last completed novel *La Chute* (The Fall) is set in Amsterdam and positioned against World War II: it begins with the narrator considering how he lives in the city's former Jewish quarter, cleared out of Jewish people by Hitler. According to literary critic Shoshana Felman, *The Fall* was meant as a condemnation of the people of his generation who remained silent during the Holocaust.

# Discuss

1. France's Jewish community was gaining prominence during the interwar years. For some people, this did not sit well.
  - a) Do you think some people resent the success of others, especially successful minorities?
  - b) If so, how can literature help remedy this problem?
  - c) If so, how can the law help remedy this problem?
2. The French Republic was based on the ideals of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity). How did Vichy France's obsessive, negative focus on the identity of Jewish people undermine these ideals?
3. Think back to Rieux's statement that "the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency" (136).
  - a) In times of crisis especially, why do some people look to cast blame?
  - b) Can you think of instances of blame-casting during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - c) Why would common decency be a better approach?

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas A. Christakis. *Apollo's Arrow*. Hachette Book Group, 2020, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> Vivian Grosswald Curran. "Law and Human Suffering: A Slice of Life in Vichy France." *Law & Literature*, vol. 29 no. 1, 2017, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Sean B. Carroll. *Brave Genius*, Broadway Books, 2013, p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> quoted in Robert Zaretsky. *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*. Cornell University Press, 2010, p. 56-57.

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Brian Farrell. "Albert Camus' 'The Plague' and the art of living during times of catastrophe." *Waging Nonviolence*. 14 April 2020. <https://wagingnonviolence.org/podcast/albert-camus-the-plague-nonviolent-resistance-rescue-wwii-coronavirus/>

<sup>6</sup> David Ohana. "Camus and the Israelis." *Israel and its Mediterranean Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 137.



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## Part Three

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