

A vivid tale of Paris in the wartime

Book Review

In spite of its deliberately dispassionate stance, this is an absorbing account of a disparate group bound by little but nationality, writes **John Lloyd**

With war, and the shockingly sudden collapse of the French and British armies, the Americans in Paris were in an ambiguous but not a dangerous position. They were neutral: their embassy remained open and recognised; their institutions and property were exempt from requisition. The Germans were generally inclined - even anxious - to be correct: they had no desire to anger the US in the early stages of the war.

Some were, indeed, sympathetic to the Nazis. Florence Jay Gould, a beautiful and wealthy socialite, enjoyed a close friendship with the German ambassador Otto Abetz, and kept a literary salon for Nazi and French collaborationist figures. Glass, in a narrative rigorously free from overt judgment of his own, tells us too little about Gould, her salon and her apparently easy enfolding into German-occupied society. Nor, even more strangely, does he give more than the barest of bones of

the story of Josephine Baker, the scandalous, generous and courageous black singer, though it is even more worth telling. He leaves us with few details other than that "her decision not to abandon France was moral: the Nazis represented an extreme version of the racial hatred she had escaped in the United States".

There were other such moral beacon. Ambassador William C. Bullitt - of a wealthy, partly Jewish, partly WASP Philadelphia family, raised in Europe - had lost his own enthusiasm for Stalin during a stint in the Soviet Union as the first US ambassador; and stayed at his post when the Germans arrived. So complete was the flight of French authority, Bullitt became "the American Mayor of Paris", dealing with the arriving Germans as if he had authority to dispose of issues of policing, curfew and supplies.

Sylvia Beach, proprietor of the Shakespeare and Company bookshop, stayed on too - in her case right through the war. She struggled to keep open a literary centre that had ensured the publication of James Joyce and provided a meeting point for the anglophone and francophone literary worlds. She mounted what resistance she could to the darkening years of war and the encroachments of hunger and cold. Towards the end of the war, a senior German officer swept up to the shop in a grey limousine and demanded a copy of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: Joyce, he said, had a strong following in Ger-

many. Beach refused to sell it to him, saying it was the last copy: but soon after, realising that her literary resistance was becoming impossible, she closed the shop and stored the books above it. She never re-opened.

The most intriguing figure, to whom Glass returns time and again in the narrative, is Charles Bedaux - a Frenchman with US citizenship, an entrepreneur in many fields, developer of time and motion systems that had

Americans in Paris:

Life and Death under Nazi Occupation, 1940-1944

By Charles Glass
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made him the bugbear of US unions. He, with his wife Fern, also stayed on - seeking friends and allies in every camp - German, Vichy French and other - avid to keep his many companies going and to create grandiose projects, such as a peanut oil pipeline through North Africa. He had the distinction of being arrested by the Germans, the French and Americans: the last proved the least forgiving, intern- ing him in North Africa with his peanut oil pipeline still unbuilt, flying him to Miami and putting him on trial for treason, a charge that carried the death penalty. Instead he committed suicide.

One figure stands out as unambiguously heroic - Dr Sumner Jackson, the chief surgeon of the American Hospital. He kept it going through the war, treating British airmen and French railway workers, among others. Jackson decided from the first day of the occupation that he would resist the Nazis. At great risk to himself, his wife and his son, he established an "underground railway" for escaping Brits, French resistance fighters and Jews, an activity which he kept up through most of the war.

Finally uncovered, the whole family was sent to concentration camps: father and son, evacuated before the advancing allies, were herded with the other inmates on to ships - which were sunk by Allied bombing. His son survived (as did the mother, in a separate camp). Jackson perished, a truly savage irony.

Glass has constructed a story of extraordinary precision, crafting stories from his main characters that are of absorbing interest in themselves, full of incident and anecdote. The steely distance he takes from judgment, though well pitched to allow the exercise of one's own evaluation of character and motive, can be unnerving: at least occasional interventions of warmth or distaste would have been welcome. But that is how he wants to cast his authorial persona, and it is broadly fit for the purpose.

The writer is an FT columnist