

1

Introduction

We, Marshal of France, Head of the French State . . . decree: Article 1—The removal of statues and monuments in copper alloy, located in the public domain and in administrative buildings, which are not of artistic or historic interest, will proceed. Article 2—A commission will be created in each department to determine the statues and monuments to be conserved by reason of their artistic or historic character . . . Article 3—The removed metal objects will be made available to the Secretary of State for Industrial Production so that the constituent metal may enter the cycle of industrial or agricultural production.

*Ph. Pétain, Vichy, October 11, 1941*¹

A SHORT DISTANCE from the Place Denfert-Rochereau, down a tree-lined Parisian boulevard, one stumbles upon a strange marker, a stone mass inscribed “F. Arago, 1786–1853, *Souscription Nationale*.” This monument, though popular with pigeons, attracts little attention otherwise. Few passers-by, if they notice it at all, would pause to wonder whether a statue had ever graced its top. Some longtime resident of the *quartier* might remember that the pedestal once supported a bronze homage to the scientist and politician François Arago by the sculptor Oliva, raised by national public subscription in 1893.² Some may even recall the statue’s removal on a cold December morning in 1941.³ But for most, the story behind this empty pedestal remains unknown. The same is true for scores of lost and forgotten metal monuments all over France.

Between October 1941 and August 1944, French cities, towns, and villages lost most of their public bronze statuary. Conservative estimates of the number of works destroyed range between 1,527 and 1,750 decorative and commemorative statues and monuments in the public domain

(war memorials and monuments on church property were excluded).⁴ This widespread removal and destruction of artwork touched almost every French community, and significantly undermined a form of civic artwork that had dominated French municipal landscapes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Despite public forgetfulness, the fact that bronze statuary was melted down during the Second World War is relatively well known and appears anecdotally in a number of histories of the period and memoirs of contemporaries, as well as in art historical studies of French monuments.⁵ References to melted statues are frequently marshalled to invoke the impact of Nazi occupation, the extent of the collaborationist Vichy government's social and moral revolution, and the turbulent climate of wartime France. But the campaign itself has only very recently been the topic of any sustained scholarly inquiry.⁶

In early encounters with this episode, I assumed, like many others, that the destruction of French bronzes was a German initiative. I also assumed that this programme must surely represent a reactionary attempt on Vichy's part to reshape French commemorative practices. It seemed obvious that this was a case of cultural and historical revisionism, an expression of Vichy's National Revolution in public art policy. Documents in the archives, however, seemed to support neither contention.⁷ I saw very little German presence in the correspondence surrounding this campaign, and the legislation and supporting documentation that emanated from Vichy revolved almost entirely around questions of metal recovery. I began, therefore, to investigate the possibility that my assumptions about the melting of French bronze statues—informed by prevailing historical and popular notions of long standing—were, in fact, a misinterpretation.

What the archives did reveal is an episode that intersects with a number of contentious issues that relate to the history of wartime France and occupied Europe, and to much broader questions that are the domain of social and cultural history. At work here are the politics and economics of the Nazi occupation and exploitation of France, as well as the politics and ideology of the Vichy regime in the various stages of its relationship with Germany, and its relationship with the French people. This is, in part, a study of the French administration in both the occupied and unoccupied zones, and its negotiation of a variety of conflicting goals and priorities, as well as its navigation of the strange and perilous terrain between the demands of the occupying powers and Vichy's assertions of sovereignty.

This is also, however, a study of the political, symbolic, and emotional value of public art. It testifies to the role of public artwork in the construction of local, regional, and national identities, and to a politics of patrimony that runs much deeper than official cultural policy as outlined and implemented by the state. We see, in the public reaction to the dismantling of French bronze statues, the local dynamics that shaped and propelled this politics of patrimony. The impact of the bronze episode on French communities and their reaction to this impact reveal, therefore, a range of issues surrounding the politics of commemoration, and the varied and shifting relationships between art and the construction of memory and community.

The destruction of French bronze statues and monuments also raises another fascinating dynamic. The demolition of public statuary, and the glaring emptiness that was the legacy of this episode, provide an unusual and particularly interesting example of the ways in which loss and absence color commemorative practices and cultural memory. The ways in which French communities dealt with this loss and absence during the war and in the postwar period raise much broader questions of the symbolic and physical reconstruction of France in the wake of Vichy and the Occupation, and highlight the complex interplay of remembering and forgetting that characterize the way in which “the dark years” have been dealt with in French memory and historiography.⁸

The most remarkable feature of this episode, however, is the public reaction to the French government’s campaign to dismantle and smelt down bronze statuary. In the French provinces in particular, there was an outpouring of vehement and energetic protest. Private citizens and their public representatives condemned this initiative vociferously, unequivocally, and often with important political consequences. In wartime France, whether under Nazi occupation or Vichy supervision, protest of any kind was a perilous endeavor. Nevertheless, French communities took strident measures to protect their public statuary, to protest its removal, and to condemn its destruction. The striking exception, however, was the public reaction in Paris. Parisians did not demonstrate anywhere near the same measure of opposition to the loss of public artwork as other French communities did. This accounts, perhaps, for the nature of historical attention previously given to this episode. With one exception, the destruction of French bronze statuary between 1941 and 1944 has been treated as phenomenon that principally affected the capital.⁹ And because, in Paris, the

statues were not particularly missed, the symbolic, political, and cultural implications of the loss of this artwork have remained largely unexplored.¹⁰ Although the dismantled statues were not missed in Paris, they were desperately missed in the rest of France. Rather than disregard this phenomenon as an expression of the unsophisticated taste and backward provincialism of smaller French communities, it seems that much can be gleaned from the outpouring of protest that this campaign generated throughout France. Indeed, investigation of the locally rooted, small-scale social action of French communities faced with the loss of bronze monuments has proven to be very revealing.¹¹

The popular response to Vichy's destruction of statuary is particularly interesting for what it says about the hopes and fears of the French population during this time of crisis and instability. The overwhelmingly negative public reaction to the campaign in the French provinces was due to people's pride in the prestige, culture, and history of their *petite patrie*. Many of the figures commemorated in local statuary were relatively obscure, often unknown in other parts of France, but celebrities in the towns and villages of their birth and an integral part of the lives of ordinary people. Françoise Gaspard, for example, describes her own affection for the monuments of Dreux in her introduction to *A Small City in France*:

Like most children who grow up in a fairly small town, I walked those streets every day . . . I walked from my parents' house to my grandparents' and on Thursdays to the municipal library and the Cercle Laique. Those streets were an education . . . The Place Rotrou, rue Rotrou, and the Lycée Rotrou all honour the most illustrious of Dreux's native sons. When I attended the Sorbonne, I was chagrined to discover that most of my fellow students had no idea who Jean de Rotrou was . . . [But he had] figured in my civic as well as my literary education [growing up in Dreux,] and each time I pass his statue I pay my respects.¹²

The depth of public reaction to the destruction of monuments to such figures as Jean de Rotrou testifies to the genuine affection felt for these statues in French communities.¹³ From today's perspective, we might identify more with Robert Musil's statement, "Nothing is as invisible as a monument."¹⁴ A popular syndicated cartoonist has satirized commemorative statuary with the depiction of a "monument to the forgotten something or other."¹⁵ And, certainly, many Parisians in the 1940s viewed the removal of statues with relief. Despite this, we must not lose sight of the genuine attachment, born of pride and affection, that many communities felt for their statues.

Monuments were often—by virtue of their placement in squares, parks, and boulevards—participants in the daily life of the community. Market days, festivals, parades, and celebrations took place at their feet. Statues marked meeting places and participated in ritual. For many communities, statues were much more than part of the urban landscape, they were deeply tied to the emotional life of the town and its inhabitants. The reaction to the destruction of statuary, as a result, assumed a strikingly emotional tenor.

Also striking is the range of opposition that was mobilized against this government initiative. Opponents of the bronze demolition campaign ranged from prominent members of Vichy's own administration (Pétain himself intervened on several occasions to protect monuments) to clandestine Resistance networks.¹⁶ Protest ranged from highly symbolic though poignantly futile gestures such as leaving wreaths and bouquets on empty pedestals, to the much more perilous and proactive theft and concealment of statues slated for demolition. The picture that emerges is of a strikingly diverse spectrum of motives, methods, and vectors of protest, united in rejection of this campaign.

The range of opposition to Vichy's bronze mobilization campaign hints at the uneasy relationship between the French population and the *Etat Français*. One of the main dilemmas faced by historians interested in public opinion in this period is how to account for the volume of support that Vichy initially received, and the subsequent and dramatic erosion of that support. As H. R. Kedward describes, the image that Vichy projected was responsible for much of the early submission of the southern zone to the Pétainist regime.¹⁷ "The degree of [popular] conciliation [with Vichy] was mostly due to the exigencies of 1940, the charisma of Pétain, and the wide agreement that unity was better than disunity in the crisis, but much of it was also due to the peculiar potential of Vichy, compounded as it was of highly traditional social and political interests on the one hand and hopes of change and innovation on the other."¹⁸ Jean-Marie Guillon has also suggested that the widespread popular support for Vichy in 1940 had little to do with ideology but, rather, with the image of the courageous old *Maréchal*, whose affection for France and solidarity with its population led him to stick it out with them in their misery, and to do his best to bring about national regeneration and liberty.¹⁹ Vichy's own policies, the regime's increasing vassalage to Germany, and the mounting sacrifices, privations, and indignities suffered by the French population tarnished this image, however, and increasingly undermined support for the *Etat Français*.

Historians now widely acknowledge 1942 as the pivotal year in this process. The German occupation of the southern zone, increasing demands for French labor for Germany, and the increasing scarcity of goods of all kinds, had a serious impact on public opinion and distanced the French population from the Vichy regime. “Against all its declared intentions, the Vichy regime, by its internal policy alone [whose true shape and implications emerged in 1942] caused dissent and created resistance.”²⁰ The first wave of the bronze campaign unfolded during this pivotal year and must be seen in the context of this radicalization of Vichy policy and its subsequent alienation of the French population. The French people’s reaction to the loss of bronze statues offers additional illustration of this alienation, but also locates a further explanation for it. Charles Maurras wrote of the statue campaign:

We hadn’t really fully understood what the defeat meant . . . The departure of these heavy masses of non-ferrous metal made it clear; clear enough, here and there, to cause tears. And so it was really true, we had been defeated. And this obliges us to part with these [statues] whose meaning is revealed suddenly with eloquence—the honour of our country, our honour!²¹

The debacle of 1940 brought national humiliation; the defeat and armistice were a deep source of shame. This crisis of identity led the French population to look to Pétain in the summer of 1940 for national regeneration, but it also led them to grasp on to symbols of past achievement, grandeur, and prestige. As Kedward has illustrated so persuasively, “Much of the early occupation period can be seen as France in pursuit of its past as well as its future.”²² In the popular reaction to the destruction of bronzes, the importance of public art and commemorative statuary to the creation, definition, and sustenance of local, regional, and national identities comes to the fore. As protesters were quick to point out to Vichy, a love of the nation stems from a love of the region. In the glories of the *petite patrie* national salvation would be found. How could the *Etat Français*—whose greatest ambition was the regeneration of France—so undermine French patrimony by eradicating these symbols of local pride and honor?

Another feature of the popular reaction to the destruction of bronzes also underscores this yearning for unity. Much of the public opposition to the bronze campaign was fuelled by rumor. Rumors circulated about which monuments would be targeted and when but, even more importantly, about the purpose of the mobilization campaign itself, and the

destination and eventual use of the metal derived from statuary. At the heart of the campaign was a grand deception by the Vichy regime. The metal derived from statues was destined for the German armaments industry, and the French population suspected as much. But the French government insisted that the metal would be used exclusively for agriculture and industry in France. This deceit was aimed not solely at the French population, but at the bronze campaign's administration itself. Apart from the main architects of the program, it appears that all levels of government and industry involved in the campaign were instructed that they were working in the interests of the French economy. Vichy's propaganda apparatus worked diligently—with seemingly little awareness of its duplicity—to counter rumors that French bronzes were being turned into German bullets.

Nevertheless, the rumors were widespread and in themselves provide a source of insight into life in wartime France. According to Guillon, rumors—“News passed on which might be true, or false, but which [is] always credible in the context of the moment, and meaningful for those who spread [it]”—are particularly valuable as a barometer of public fears, as a measure of political engagement, and as a way of penetrating collective imagination.²³ Rumors are, naturally, particularly important in times of crisis and trauma. Rumors in wartime France were “a way of calling into question that which is disseminated officially, which is not believed because of an age-old feeling, accentuated in these years, of not being told the whole truth, of being kept in the dark and of being lied to.”²⁴ Rumors were evidence of a widespread and systematic suspicion toward the regime and, according to Guillon, represent “a form of fighting, however meager”:

This means that rumours played a role in the politicization of a large part of the French population as it rediscovered some common beliefs about the future. They helped to reconstruct a shared identity, affecting particularly milieus and individuals for whom politics was not a primary concern.²⁵

The most important function of rumors was the role they played in the formation of a sense of common purpose.²⁶ There is a feeling of fraternity and community inherent in the spreading of rumors, a discourse of “us” versus “them” that fosters a sense of unity. It is, in many ways, the search for a sense of unity, a cohesive and unifying national identity born of regional patriotism, that both underlies and defines popular protest against the bronze mobilization campaign in France.

Vichy's disingenuous treatment of the campaign to demolish French bronze statuary also testifies to its slim margin of maneuver. The *Etat Français'* fragile sovereignty, the demands of the French population, and the increasing constraints placed on France by the Germans meant that Pétain's regime had few alternatives. As a result, a strain developed between the need to satisfy demands for metal and the need to placate public opinion. This dichotomy structured the bronze campaign and is reflected, therefore, in the organization of this study. Part One—entitled “The Economics of Exploitation”—deals with the context, the origins, the structure, and the implementation of the campaign to remove and re-smelt bronze statues throughout France. Chapter 2 outlines the economic and political context that made nonferrous metal recovery initiatives necessary, looking particularly at French supplies of copper and at Germany's hunger for this strategic raw material. Chapter 3 describes the organization and functioning of what might be called “the bronze bureaucracy” (those branches of the French administration responsible for overseeing the removal and re-smelting of bronze statues and monuments) and the process of the dismantling and subsequent destruction of statuary throughout France. The emphasis in this first section is on the removal of bronze statuary as a wartime metal recovery measure. The aim, therefore, is to demonstrate that the motivation for what Vichy termed “the mobilization of bronzes” was primarily economic.

Part Two—“The Politics of Patrimony”—answers the question that inevitably arises from the contention that the impetus behind the bronze mobilization campaign was strictly the recovery of nonferrous metals. The commemorative impulse is an inherently political one, and so the destruction of commemorative statues and monuments must also contain a political dimension. Furthermore, the sanctioned and organized destruction of artwork by a reactionary and revanchist regime in a time of war and occupation is unavoidably political. The second half of the book aims, therefore, to demonstrate that the political dimension of the destruction of bronze statues lies in the impact of the campaign on the French population. Popular responses to the campaign were shaped by the politics of commemoration at the local level, and an investigation of this reveals distinctions between public perceptions and popular responses in Paris and in the French provinces. Chapter 4 investigates the public response to the campaign in Paris and throughout France. This response was inspired by myriad political and ideological considerations, but took the form primar-

ily of a discourse of regionalism outside the capital, and of “statuemanía” in Paris itself.²⁷ Chapter 5 investigates the symbolic impact of the campaign during the war and in the postwar period through a discussion of the relationships between memory and absence. The ways in which French communities dealt with the absences created by empty pedestals revealed local concerns that ranged from mourning communities’ losses to embracing progress and modernity through reconstruction. Finally, the conclusion looks at the way the episode of the destruction of bronze statues has been written in French memory and historiography, highlighting two of the central myths of the Vichy Syndrome.²⁸

This study aims primarily, therefore, to place the bronze mobilization campaign in the economic context of the German occupation of France, as well as in the national political context of Vichy’s policy of collaboration, but also in the cultural context of French national patrimony. In my view, these contexts make this an event that had important consequences for French cultural heritage and is much more than simply a chapter in the history of the urban décor of Paris. Furthermore, this episode suggests considerable nuance in the relationships between the *Etat Français*, the French administration, and the French population. The episode reveals center-periphery tensions within the French administration and in popular sentiment, highlights conflict between branches of the French bureaucracy that are normally considered as having worked closely, and provides another example of the contradictions between the words and deeds of Vichy, particularly in the regime’s discourse of decentralization that was accompanied by such vigorous centralizing tendencies.

This episode also offers a number of insights into French regionalism in the 1940s. The regionalist sentiment expressed by the French population in protest to the removal of their statuary is not only of the reactionary Maurassian version embraced by Vichy. The discourse of regionalism was also mobilized against the regime, demonstrating that regionalist ideas permeated the entire political spectrum, and were as capable of inspiring resistance to as compliance with Pétain’s National Revolution. Finally, the ramifications of this one relatively minor episode in the history of wartime France underscore the value of an interdisciplinary perspective. The economic, the political, the social, the cultural, and even the existential converge in the tale of France’s lost bronzes to forge a compelling and—one hopes—enlightening story.