



READING GROUP GUIDE

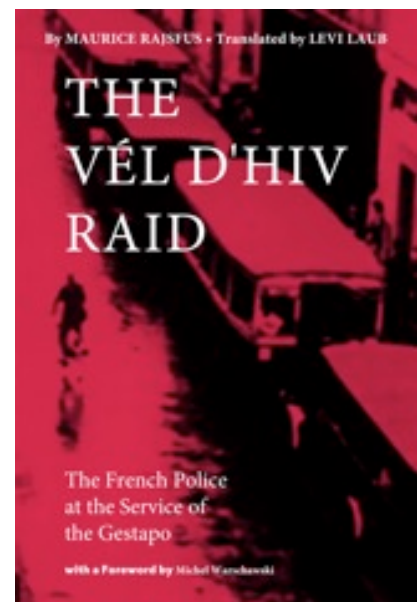
The Vél d'Hiv Raid: The French Police at the Service of the Gestapo By Maurice Rajsfus; Translated by Levi Laub

Introduction

On July 16 and 17, 1942, several thousand French police participated in a vast wave of arrests in Paris and its suburbs. The victims were foreign born Jews. In the course of those two tragic days, 13,152 men, women, children and old people were rounded up and then locked up in the Vélodrome d'Hiver (Vél d'Hiv) (the winter bicycle stadium) or in the camp at Drancy before being deported to the extermination camps in Eastern Europe.

This ignominious act committed by French police is regularly commemorated in schools so that this barbaric event will never be forgotten.

According to the orders of the Gestapo, faithfully executed by the French police, only Jews of foreign nationalities needed to be rounded up, but the police, anxious to make their numbers, amplified the horror of the mission by complying in the arrest of more than four thousand children, almost all of them French. This iconic roundup – there had already been others, in 1941, followed by identical operations in the Autumn of 1942, then in 1943 and 1944 – is known in France under the name The Vél d'Hiv Raid. This crime against humanity, committed by French mercenaries, will remain an indelible stain branding a police institution that has never officially recognized its crime. What's more, it was on October 14, 1944, that General de Gaulle decided to decorate the Parisian police, now become Republican again after the Liberation of France, with a collective Legion of Honor ...



The great raid was a demonstration of the malignant power of a corps of government servants that had lost its bearings and should serve to warn all citizens of free countries.

*– From the Introduction
by Maurice Rajsfus*



REVIEWS

"Maurice Rajsfus has devoted his life to denouncing and combating racism, fascism, intolerance, and police brutality, while putting in his texts a good dose of caustic irony."

- Jakilea, Basque Human Rights Defense League

"If [Rajsfus] still wishes to recall how scrupulously – and even with zeal – the French police applied Nazi orders, he also wants to warn us against certain xenophobic or discriminatory speech still heard recently that could lead to behavior of that bygone age."

- *Ekaitza* – weekly newspaper, Bayonne, France

"With passion and indignation, Maurice Rajsfus recounts the worst single crime of the Vichy regime in France: the pre-dawn arrest by French police, at German instigation, on July 16-17, 1942, of 13,152 Jewish men, women, and children, and their ordeal on the way to extermination. Rajsfus brings this terrible experience to life with contemporary texts – high-level Franco-German haggling, detailed police instructions, eye-witness testimony, and press commentary."

- Robert O. Paxton, author of *Vichy and the Jews*



READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What was the Marchandean law of April of 1939, and why do you think one of the Vichy government's first decrees, in August 1940, was to abolish it? How was in the interest of Vichy to abolish the Marchandean law and how did it help them "power-share" with the Nazis and govern unoccupied France?
2. What were the effects of abolishing the Marchandean law? Who was it aimed to protect? Who suffered most when the law was annulled? Who benefited?
3. How do you respond to the press articles excerpted in *The Vél d'Hiv Raid* as examples of the type of racist, xenophobic utterances unleashed after Nazi occupation? Are there any examples of this kind of thinking that one can still find today through media channels? How are they protected or condemned, and by whom?
4. What are the main arguments posed by *The Vél d'Hiv Raid: The French Police at the Service of the Gestapo* about unchecked racism and how it paved the way to the Vél d'Hiv Raid and the ultimate deportation and murder of more than 60,000 Jewish refugees? (Another 15,000 deported and murdered Jews were native born French citizens.)
5. What were some of the responses of the Jews who were arrested in the Vél d'Hiv Raid? What would you have done if you were arrested? If you saw a neighbor being arrested?
6. What were the conditions like at the Vélodrome d'Hiver? How did people respond to being there? If you were in this situation, what would you have done to cope or resist? What would members of your family have done?
7. What were the responsibilities of the police to their superiors? What were the responsibilities of the police to the Nazi occupiers? What were the responsibilities of the police to the citizens of France? What were the responsibilities of the police to the tripartite motto of France: "Liberté, égalité, fraternité ou la mort"? What do those words mean to you?



8. Fifty years after the Nazis invaded Paris, and as an answer to Holocaust deniers and Holocaust minimizers in France, the Gayssot law enacted on July 13, 1990, made it an offense in France to question the existence or size of the category of crimes against humanity as defined in the London Charter of 1945 (the basis of which Nazi leaders were convicted by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945–46). What do the Gayssot law and the Marchandeaup law have in common and where are they different? Are there any relevant examples today of the Marchandeaup decree? Of the Gayssot law?

9. During the 2016 United States election campaign, Donald Trump referred to an entire group of people, Mexicans, as rapists and drug dealers.

- a. What larger goals did he have in vilifying a group of people in this way? How did this help him? How did this hurt him?
- b. Should the United States and other democratic countries punish racist and xenophobic speech as a crime? On what grounds? Using the logic of the Gayssot law, under what circumstances could Trump be guilty of a crime against humanity?

10. Not a single German officer, soldier or policeman, participated in the Vél d'Hiv raid. The roundup of 13,152 Jewish men, women and children was conducted by as many as 9,000 French police serving the Gestapo without a bare murmur of dissent in the ranks or policemen refusing their orders. Fifty-three years later, in 1995, French President Jacques Chirac issued a faltering apology, which can be found in an Appendix to *The Vél d'Hiv Raid: The French Police at the Service of the Gestapo*. Seventeen years after Chirac's speech, a more robust statement, *The crime committed in France by France*, was delivered by President Hollande in August of 2012.

- a. Compare and contrast the statements by Chirac and Hollande by looking carefully at the tone and the language.
- b. What larger purposes might the two presidents have had in crafting their speeches in these ways?
- c. What signals did each send to the populace of France?



11. A leading Jewish institution under Nazi occupation, the Union général des israélites de France (UGIF) got word of the impending raid as of the early days of July 1942. They not only failed to warn or notify the Jewish population of Paris, and other cities throughout France, they specifically asked police officials to keep the news secret so as not to promote chaos and panic. Some within the organization acted as spies and snuck out lists of children in order to try to save them and hide them with farming families in the country.

- a. What are the roles of people within organizations who see actions that they think are morally wrong?
- b. Should whistleblowers and spies be treated as traitors? Why or why not? Under what circumstances?
- c. Compare the actions of the UGIF to the notorious Judenrate (Jewish Councils) organized by the Nazis to control the Eastern European Jewish populations under Nazi rule and facilitate their deportation to the death camps. Many will say the comparison is unfair; others will say the comparison must be made. Why do you think this may or may not be true? Argue both sides of this sensitive topic.
- d. Use the text *The Vél d'Hiv Raid: The French Police at the Service of the Gestapo* to discover evidence of people who acted with their conscience in the face of impending disaster.
- e. What would you have done in this situation? As a member of the UGIF? As a member of the police?

12. Two years elapsed between the French surrender to Hitler's armies in June 1940 to the notorious Vél d'Hiv Raid of July 1942.

- a. What did the French authorities do during those years in both the occupied and unoccupied zones to find out more about or keep tabs on the Jewish population?
- b. How was that bureaucracy set up and under whose orders?
- c. How were those measures and orders employed against the Jews?
- d. What happened to those records?



13. In his Foreword, Michel Warschawski writes, "Without making improper comparisons, the roundup of the Vél d'Hiv is a very current topic. Maurice Rajsfus' narrative can help us grasp both the logic and the implications of a policy of exclusion of communities because of their ethnic, national or religious origin, resulting that they are not protected by the State of which they are a part." What historical lessons can we learn from the experience of immigrants and Jews targeted by the French and German fascists?

14. Do you agree with registries of people, any people, by governments? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not? How can ordinary citizens oppose and defeat the call for registries they feel are unjust?

a. Trump called for a Muslim registry during his presidential campaign. How is this action similar and dissimilar from what happened under the Nazis in France?

b. How do you feel about towns and cities declaring themselves to be "sanctuary cities" and not cooperating with ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)? Is your city a sanctuary city? Who makes decisions about whether to be or not to be a sanctuary city?

c. Should ICE be allowed to wear jackets with the word "Police" on them, which may confuse people because ICE is a Federal agency and not associated with local police? What cities have disallowed this and why? How successful are local police in keeping ICE from wearing these jackets? What is the result of people being confused about the difference between ICE and local police?

d. Do people have a moral and historical obligation to defend the rights of immigrants and people of different faiths?

15. Why do you think the author wanted to write this book, the only of its kind dedicated to this raid alone?

16. As a "microhistory" of one event among many in the Holocaust that aimed to annihilate European Jewry, how does this book help us understand other raids conducted by the Nazis? How does it help us understand other aspects of the Holocaust?



Maurice Rajsfus (b. 1928) is an activist and former investigative journalist for *Le Monde*. He is the author of thirty books, including many examining the Vichy regime and its legacy in French police culture. He has also written about Drancy concentration camp and Israel-Palestine, as well as co-authored several illustrated books about history. In 1990, Rajsfus and several friends founded "Ras l'Front," an anti-Le Pen association of far-left-wing organizations extremely active in the 1990s against the rise of nationalist parties in France and fascist ideas. They worked together and promoted leftist causes through a monthly publication as well as actions. He served as chairman from 1991–1999. From 1994–2012 Rajsfus created and circulated "Que fait la police," a "Cop Watch" bulletin with press clippings detailing human rights abuses by French police. His books about the Vél d'Hiv raid and his experiences during WWII have been brought together to form the basis of a YA comic (Tartamudo editions) as well as a play written and directed by Philippe Ogouz, which was then adapted for film in 2010, *Souvenirs d'un vieil enfant: La rafle du Vel' d'Hiv* (Memories of an Old Child: The Roundup of the Vel' d'Hiv), directed by Alain Guesnier. Maurice Rajsfus lives in Paris with his wife, and has two sons as well as several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.





Levi Laub (b.1938) is an activist and occasional translator who worked with the Progressive Labor Party in the United States for 15 years primarily as an organizer of immigrant labor in the California Valleys. In 1963 Laub led a group of 59 students to Cuba via Prague, violating and challenging the travel ban for US citizens that was in place at the time. Upon his return to the United States, Laub was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Riots broke out in the hearing room when Capitol police were called in to remove Laub and his supporters. Within the month, Laub and three other organizers of the Cuba trip were indicted in Federal Court for violating the Travel Ban. In *U.S. v. Laub*, the Supreme Court ruled in his favor, considering it unconstitutional to disallow American citizens their right to free movement. He met Maurice Rajsfus in Paris while doing research into communist militancy in the French Resistance, about which Rajsfus wrote a book entitled *L'An Prochain, La Revolution* (Next Year, The Revolution).

Michel Warschawski (b.1949) (Mikado) is an Israeli anti-Zionist peace activist and journalist. He was born in Strasbourg, France, where his father was a rabbi. He moved to Jerusalem for Talmudic studies at age 16 and later completed a degree in philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He led the Marxist Revolutionary Communist League (Matzpen, Israeli Section of the Fourth International) until its demise in the 1990s, and co-founded the Alternative Information Center (AIC), an organization uniting Israeli and Palestinian anti-Zionist activists. His books include *On the Border* (South End Press) and *Towards an Open Tomb – The Crisis of Israeli Society* (Monthly Review Press).



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