

Return to [Equinoxes, Issue 9: Printemps/Été 2007](#)

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EN REMONTANT LE BOUL'MICH: ZAZOUS AND THE COLLABORATIONIST PRESS IN OCCUPIED PARIS, 1942

In an article titled “En descendant le Boul’ Mich...” in the collaborationist weekly, *Jeunesse*, in early 1941, the right-wing journalist Max Davigny wrote what seems to be the first of many derogatory descriptions of Paris’s wartime “swing kids”. Taking the reader on a tour of the Latin Quarter, Davigny lamented what he saw as French youth’s degeneracy.

Before us is the old Soufflot, now the Dupon-Latin. Let’s go in.... Noise, neon lights, a crowded smoke-den! Where are the joyful students and the grisettes of “days bygone”? It’s a cosmopolitan scrum, an international exhibition.

Bum-fluffed youths parade there, pale, hair slicked back, coloured scarves and dirty shirts; girls go round, clumsily made-up, with eyes circled in blue eye-shadow, with lips too red, with tatty furs on their shoulders; strange, disturbing individuals come and go: brownish-yellow complexions, frizzy hair, noses hooked over thin lips, a jumble of wogs, of crooks, of people without a fatherland.

Is “that” French youth? No, that’s not French youth. We can’t rely on “that” to rebuild France. Come on, let’s go, I feel the need to breathe some fresh air....¹

Davigny’s language was laden with anti-Semitic and racial references. Although this revealed general fascist racial bigotry, it also voiced a widely shared fear that French youth in particular were corrupted by Jews and lacked racial purity. Why was it that this youth cultural underworld upset Davigny so? Like other more or less fascist groups, the collaborationist Vichy régime, under the leadership of octogenarian World War I hero Maréchal Pétain, aimed to regenerate France; and this would begin with youth. This young generation was of immense importance to the goals of the régime’s *Révolution Nationale*. As Pierre Giolitto explains, “The youth the Maréchal wanted would place itself firmly under the triple sign of *Travail*, which is “the France of today”, of *Famille*, which is “the France of tomorrow” and finally of *Patrie*, which is “the France of forever” (444).² French youth were to be re-educated under what Julian Jackson terms the “reconstruction of mankind” (327-328). The ideologues pictured youth as the nation’s source of redemption and salvation. As W D Halls contends, “for Vichy, youth was an alibi for the unsuccessful past...for Frenchmen everywhere youth was... also the hope for the future” (163).

This paper explores the ways collaborationists represented the Zazou youth. It will study depictions of the Zazous in *Jeunesse* in 1942, with particular focus on the column titled “En remontant le Boul’ Mich”. It will argue that through adopting the Zazous as their scapegoat, the press endowed them with political meaning. Zazou youth sub-culture became politicised, not its political engagement, but rather by a discursive construction created by its opponents.

Before we delve into this discussion, we should first introduce the Zazous. The English word “swing” and the childlike appellation “zazou” were employed interchangeably in *Jeunesse* to describe these young people.³ A cartoon by A R Charlet, titled “Service Rural: Zazou-zaux Champs”, published on the front page of *Jeunesse* on 28 June, 1942, illustrates the typical male and female Zazou. The title referred to a program under which young city-dwellers were encouraged to enroll for voluntary rural service. In the foreground, Charlet depicted a girl, carrying two buckets, addressing a boy who is pushing a wheelbarrow. They both appear flustered from the exertion of physical labour. The scene is obviously rural, with a farmhouse, manure, pigs, ducks and chickens in the background. The pair are adolescent, urban Parisians. The boy’s ensemble is made up of a long jacket, with large pockets. His pants are short, revealing his socks, and his shoes are thick soled. His tie is thin and tight, and his hair is big and frizzy. He has an umbrella in his wheelbarrow, as does the girl in one of her bucket-carrying hands: these were widely known as “Chamberlains”, after the former British Prime Minister (Chenoune 205). The girl wears a short skirt and platform shoes. Her sunglasses are oversized and her hair dyed platinum blond. She also appears to be wearing lipstick, and if she were to remove the glasses, she would no doubt also be heavily made-up around the eyes. If we recall Davigny’s observations in the Dupon-Latin, the heavily painted faces of the young women was an identifying feature of the “swing” girls. In the caption the girl declares, with seeming exacerbation, “Je suis swing!...” to which her male companion assuredly replies, “Tu es swing!”. The Zazous had an *argot* that adopted English words and phrases, especially the word “swing” which became, in the words of Jean-Claude Loiseau, “un mot passe-partout” (173). Even in the simple format of a cartoon it is possible to see how these two could have been irritating to a régime which sought to create austere, pure women, and virile, wholesome men.

The Zazous were identified with their passion for swing and jazz, and for their particular style of dancing in which they bounced about wagging a single finger in the air. Aside from their love for jazz, other Anglo-Saxon elements of Zazou culture were conspicuous: in their fashion, the boys evoked the British dandy, just as the girls seemed to model themselves on the Hollywood stars of the 1930s. The Zazous gathered in bars and cafés on the Champs-Élysées and in the Latin Quarter, such as the Dupon-Latin described by Davigny. As a group, they were neither ubiquitous nor large in number. Nonetheless, they were provocative and noticeable. Due to the outlandish nature of their clothing and activity, and their public presence, it is, however, unlikely that Zazous would have participated in any of the structured resistance organizations. As Richard Vinen contends, “the smart suits, rolled umbrellas and dark glasses of the *zazous* would not have fitted into the Maquis any more than they fitted into the Chantiers de la Jeunesse” (139) [Italics original].

It is important to ask why the Zazous were conceptualized as an opponent of the régime. The organized resistance was rarely named as the enemy of Vichy’s *Révolution Nationale*. The régime did not want to legitimate the resistance in any way. The Zazous, on the other hand, were easily constructed as an enemy “other”. Vichy’s trinity of *Travail Famille Patrie* found its antithesis in the Zazou youth, which was depicted as idle, individualistic and unpatriotic. They were readily linked with Gaullists, which implied loyalty to a foreign enemy of France rather than to any domestic resistance movements. Accordingly, they were a perfect scapegoat. Unlike the organized resistance, the Zazou became the personification of all that was wrong with France, without any threat of rousing sympathy or allegiance.

In *Jeunesse*, the weekly column “En remontant le Boul’ Mich” examined issues relating to student life, the Latin Quarter and the state of the nation’s tertiary education. The column

addressed the Zazous in ten of the twenty-one articles published between January and the end of July 1942. The regular author, Jean Geslin, at times attacked the subculture overtly, sometimes mocked it, and other times listed it among a host of enemies such as Jews, *métèques* and Gaullists. On 25 January, in an article subtitled “Il faut en finir avec l’individualisme étudiantin”, Geslin wrote about the lack of student participation in building *la Nouvelle France*.

Students hypnotised by the Gaullist masquerade fell back upon themselves and ever since they do not want to leave the daily grind of their studies and of their snobbism. Some work doggedly, but refuse to envisage what the young, all the young united can achieve. The others – less numerous than one thinks, but more than there should be – are “swing” and only “swing”.... Students must come to realise – they need only open their eyes – that France is there to be built.⁴

In Geslin’s opinion to have loyalty to the so-called Gaullist masquerade was to betray France. This is an early example of the *jeunes swing* being adopted as a subject of scorn. The Zazous, this article implied, could not be redeemed by the *Révolution Nationale*.

A fortnight later, Geslin treated the Zazous mockingly: his seeming humour is in fact poorly disguised contempt. On this occasion, he took the reader to the Pam-Pam bar, another well-known Zazou haunt, like the Dupon-Latin described by Davigny. Geslin reported the conversation between two young men as they drank their trademark *jus de carotte*.

The subject of the conversation is the last surprise-party at “the-hot-girl-who-perches-next-to-the-bar-where-one-can-still-find-blonds” house. Let’s have a listen:

1. The records were “eggs”(!)
2. Oh, yeah! With a dukellington rhythm
3. The small blond was “swing”. All the same, I feel a bit “slow”.

This genre of conversation is not close to finishing. Let’s leave the country of swing, without nostalgia, to discover students who, when they have fun (and, my God, they still do so fairly often), know how to do so, even when their dancing style is a bit jazz, without seeming like a carnival barker from the ghetto.⁵

Geslin sought to warn his reader against participating in what he described as the degrading, hedonistic Zazou underworld. A less explicit, yet equally telling reference to the Zazous opened an article about the revolutionary heritage of the Latin Quarter, subtitled “Au service du la Révolution Nationale”. Geslin argued that the *quartier* may have been less “swing” in the past but it was surely more original. He deplored the “degeneracy” of this generation of students as he briefly outlined the student participation in the social upheavals of 1830, 1848, and 6 February 1934. In urging students to participate in Vichy’s *Révolution*, he contested,

We are living in an epic world and this generation of students is in pursuit of Virginia tobacco.

Every moment, the map of the world is changing and their principal concern is finding

American records.

Every minute, young men are dying for a cause and the youth of the Boul' Mich' pines for English gin.⁶

The Zazous were the symbol of social irresponsibility. They were described as reprehensible. Geslin presented the so-called student preoccupation of hunting down tobacco, music and alcohol as frivolous in light of the seriousness of the *Révolution* and of the concerns of preceding generations of students.

In May, the column once again discussed the Latin Quarter's revolutionary tradition. In the guise of berating the current generation's neglect of this activist heritage, Geslin chastised the students of the *quartier* for their inaction: in this article, the Zazous were named as the only ones actually doing anything lively and provocative. He wrote, "The Latin Quarter, at other times a true revolutionary neighbourhood, has become one of the most banal neighbourhoods in Paris, animated only by the exuberant passing of a few "swing" specimens."⁷ It is here that the absence of any mention of the organized resistance is most striking, and we see how any reference to it could become a problematic legitimization. The Zazous, therefore, were introduced as the alternative: the sub-culture was filling the régime's need for an enemy. The reference to the "swing" specimens denoted the Zazous as this necessary "other". As a proponent of the right-wing *Révolution* and the collaboration, Geslin interpreted the Zazous as a form of cultural resistance. Through participating in the sub-cultural movement, young Zazous elected to join this "other", as constructed by the régime. The identity of resisters was projected upon them by their detractors.

As 1942 progressed, we see how *Jeunesse* built its indictment against the Zazous in these articles. The politicised attack reached its zenith in July. In the number of 5 July, Geslin dedicated his entire article - subtitled "Des décadents: LES ZAZOUS" - to attacking "swing" youth [Emphasis in original]. The banner of this number read "ANTI-SWING à l'action!". And action was indeed now a real possibility. At the end of May, the Jeunesses Populaires Françaises (JPF) were founded. The creation of the JPF, who were led by Honorary President Jacques Doriot (the infamous leader of the fascist Parti Populaire Française) and actual President Vauquelin, was thoroughly reported in and lauded by *Jeunesse*. In his inaugural speech, Vauquelin defined the JPF's revolutionary agenda. He outlined the organization's mission as follows: "To create a revolutionary youth movement with enough power to attract all the living youth of this country, to regenerate all of French youth, and also to have an influence on politics and on the destiny of our fatherland."⁸ Unfortunately, only an edited version of the speech is reproduced. The editor commented that Vauquelin wanted to stigmatize "swing" youth; the president's specific comments were not reported. On 14 June, members of the JPF raided streets and cafés in the Latin Quarter and on the Champs Elysées. Their aim was to *raser les zazous* (Amouroux 3: 445). On the same front page as Charlet's aforementioned "Service Rural" cartoon, the banner of the 28 June number read "Rasez le zazou, rasez le zazou...rasez' Air connu, depuis peu, grâce aux Jeunesses Populaires Françaises".

In "Des décadents: LES ZAZOUS", Geslin's polemic was unsurprising. He was condescending towards the Zazou victims of the JPF raids and congratulatory towards the perpetrators. In providing a brief background on the Zazous, he gave his view of their reaction to the outbreak of war. "The war, the combatants...trifles. What excited them was Django Reinhardt's moustache or Fred Astair's [sic.] latest dance-step."

His take on their attitude towards the Armistice was even more sneering.

Armistice. Immediately, all of polite society felt consumed by an intense patriotic fever. But, what do you expect? “Strength through joy” is less thrilling than their “pleasure through swing”. Events did not go the way they’d hoped. Oh well. Armed with a few cases of alcohol and a crate of records, they decided to wait for the victory of De Gaulle and the return of Coca-Cola.

The Nazi reference “Strength through Joy” is striking, and appears to be the only one of its kind in Geslin’s articles. It is difficult to deduce his reason for such an obvious allusion. Geslin was strongly associating the Zazous with the foreign enemies: the mention of Coca-Cola was a clear expression of anti-Americanism, and, as we have seen, De Gaulle implied a connection to London and the Allies more than to any indigenous resistance sentiment.

Geslin closed the article by applauding the JPF for their attacks on the Zazous.

Since their foundation, the Jeunesse Populaires Françaises have hunted down Decadence. Naturally, they consider the “zazou” youth as decadent youth....

In the last few days, at Neuilly, on the Champs-Élysées, and then in the Latin Quarter, a few of these “young gentlemen” with particularly abundant hair-dos and with particularly long jackets, have found themselves with shaved heads.... Decadence must be stopped, and decadent people corrected. If students, true ones, cut a few cleverly curled locks, if they shorten a few jackets, if they administer a few spankings, the zazou youth will soon disappear. [9](#)

Admiration for the attacks was a position sustained throughout *Jeunesse*. Another cartoon by Charlet, published at the start of August, lampooned the confrontation between a member of the JPF, in his navy overalls and beret with a set of hair clippers in hand, and a Zazou, in his long jacket and stove-pipe trousers with umbrella in hand. In his other hand, the Zazou holds a sheet which reads “Consignes de la B.B.C.”, another explicit reference to Gaullist or Allied sympathies. The caption reads: “When one conspires, one must pack... Wig blond and ‘chamberlain’ black... – **And when one perspires from the hat, we ‘refresh’ them with a shaved head like that!...**” [Bold in original].[10](#)

Jeunesse generally, and Geslin specifically, projected an identity upon the Zazous. This source did not provide any insights into the personal motivations of the Zazous. Nonetheless, the newspaper did construct a solid and meaningful identity for the *jeunes swing*. What, if anything, does this identity signify? The examination of *Jeunesse* demonstrates the need to reconceptualize the terms “resistance” and “collaboration”. It is possible to conclude from this case study that the Zazou sub-culture was a movement of cultural resistance: the collaborationists created an identity for the Zazous and thus endowed them with cultural significance. The régime portrayed these young people as “other” because of their dress, language, and interests. They were clearly envisaged as the antithesis of the *Révolution Nationale*’s values of *Travail Famille Patrie*. To be sure, their representation as the opposite of Vichy ideals alone does not mean “resistance”. However, it is through the formulation of the Zazous as “other” that we must define their resistance. *Jeunesse* conceptualized the Zazous as the embodiment of social decline and used them as a consistent scapegoat: they were incorporated into the collaborationist ideological rhetoric. Furthermore, the confrontation between the JPF and the Zazous framed this tension in real terms. The construction of the Zazou identity in opposition to the régime was not exclusive to the printed word. Rather, it

manifested itself in actual conflict. In the example of the Zazous, we see how Vichy tried to shape resistance in its own terms. By subscribing to Zazou culture, even after the régime's campaign against it, these young people were choosing to *be* that "other", thereby assuming the régime's construction of their cultural resistance.

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Notes:

¹ "Devant nous, c'est l'ancien Soufflot, maintenant Dupon-Latin. Entrons....Bruit, lumières au néon, cohue tabagie! Où sont les joyeux étudiants et les grisettes 'd'antan'? C'est une mêlée cosmopolite, une foire internationale. Des blancs-becs y plastronnent, pâles, cheveux 'gominés', cache-nez multicolores et chemises sales; des filles circulent, maladroitement fardées, les yeux cernés aux paupières bleues, les lèvres trop rouges, des fourrures miteuses sur les épaules; d'étranges, d'inquiétants individus vont et viennent: teint bistre, cheveux crépus, nez crochus sur des lèvres épaisses, ramassis de métèques, de 'faisans', de gens sans patrie.... C'est 'ça' la jeunesse française? Non, ce n'est pas ça! Ce n'est pas sur 'ça' que nous comptons pour relever la France. Quand même sortons, j'éprouve le besoin de respirer un peu d'air pur...." "Grisette" is slang for a French working class girl. All translations are my own.

² "La jeunesse que veut le Maréchal se placera en définitive sous le triple signe du Travail, qui est 'la France d'aujourd'hui', de la Famille, qui est 'la France de demain' et enfin de la Patrie qui est 'la France de toujours'".

³ The origin of the onomatopoeic label "zazou" is ambiguous. The term is believed to have originated with Cab Calloway and the Cotton Club Orchestra's 1933 hit "Zah Zuh Zag". Johnny Hess, who was himself a Zazou, sang the word in the chorus of his 1939 hit "Je Suis Swing". The joining of the word with the sub-culture seems to be traced back to Hess (Rearick 149-150, 261; Loiseau 61).

⁴ "Les étudiants sont hypnotisés par l'imposture gaulliste se replièrent sur eux-mêmes et depuis ils ne veulent pas sortir du train-train de leurs études et de leur snobisme. Les uns travaillent avec acharnement, mais se refusent à envisager ce que la jeunesse, toute la jeunesse unie pourrait réaliser. Les autres – moins nombreux qu'on le pense, mais plus qu'il sied – sont 'swing' et uniquement 'swing'....Les étudiants devraient se rendre compte – il n'y a qu'à ouvrir les yeux – que la France est à construire".

⁵ "Le sujet de la conversation est la dernière surprise-party chez 'la-fille-hot-qui-perche-à-côté-du-bar-où-on-trouve-encore-des-blondes' (sic). Écoutons-les:

1. Les disques étaient ‘aux oeufs’ (!).
2. Oh oui! d’un rythme dukellingtonien.
3. La petite blonde était d’un ‘swing’. Je me sens tout de même un peu ‘slow’.

Ce genre de conversation n’est pas près de finir. Quittons sans nostalgie le pays swing pour retrouver les étudiants qui, quand ils s’amusent (et mon Dieu ça leur arrive encore assez souvent) savent le faire, même en dansant sur un air de jazz, sans se donner des airs de pitre de ghetto”.

6 “Nous vivons d’épopée du monde et les étudiants de cette génération sont en quête de tabac blond. A tous les instants la carte du monde se modifie et leur principal souci est la recherche de disques américains. A chaque minute des hommes jeunes meurent pour un idéal et la jeunesse du Boul’ Mich’ soupire en pensant qu’il n’y a plus de gin anglais”.

7 “Le quartier latin, autrefois quartier révolutionnaire par excellence, est devenu l’un des quartiers les plus banals de Paris, animé seulement par les passagères exubérances de quelques spécimens ‘swing’”.

8 “Faire un mouvement révolutionnaire de jeunes d’une telle force qu’il attire à lui toute la jeunesse vivante de ce pays, qu’il régénère l’ensemble de la jeunesse française, et qu’il ainsi une influence sur la politique et sur la destinée de notre patrie”.

9 “La guerre, les combattants...bagatelles. Ce qui les passionnait, c’était la moustache de Django Reinhardt ou le dernier pas de Fred Astair [sic.].... Armistic. Immédiatement, tout ce beau monde se sent pris d’une fièvre patriotique intense. Que voulez-vous, la ‘force par la joie’, c’est moins excitant que leur ‘plaisir par le swing’. Les événements n’allaient pas dans le sens désiré par eux. Tant pis. Munis de quelques caisses d’alcool et d’une cargaison de disques, ils décidèrent d’attendre la victoire de De Gaulle et le retour du Coca-Cola.... Les ‘Jeunesses Populaires Françaises’ depuis leur fondation, traquent la Décadence. Et tout naturellement, elles considèrent la jeunesse ‘zazou’ comme une jeunesse décadente....Ces jours derniers, à Neuilly, aux Champs-Élysées, puis au Quartier Latin, quelques’uns de ces ‘petits messieurs’ aux cheveux particulièrement abondants et aux vestons particulièrement longues, se sont vus scalpés....La décadence doit être arrêtée et les décadents corrigés. Que les étudiants, les vrais, coupent quelques boucles savamment roulés, qu’ils raccourcissent quelques vestons, qu’ils administrent quelques fessées et la jeunesse zazou aura tôt fait de disparaître”.

10 “Quand on conspire il faut avoir... Perruque blond et ‘chamberlain’ noir... –**Et quand on transpire du chapeau, on se fait ‘rafrachir’ les cheveux à la tondeuse!...**”.

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