In Brief

This film is set in France at the end of World War II, at a time when the country finds itself divided between "resistants" and "collaborateurs". Against a background of deep mistrust and ambivalence, our hero-to-be is introduced to us. His name is Albert Dehoussë. He is an anonymous young man who discovers that his mother has hidden from him the truth about her past as a collaborator for the Germans during the occupation, and that she has deceived him into believing that his father was a hero of the resistance, rather than the drunk that he actually was.

Fiction and reality intermingle in the film. Never is imagination more fertile than when the mind is met with an obstructive reality, one that tries to cripple and one that forces Albert into masquerade.

The film presents us with a satirical revision of French post-war history, and more importantly reminds us of our weaknesses as they are reflected by the character Albertinvents for himself.

Un héros très discret is a major French film which won the screenplay award at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival. It was released in France in the summer of the same year and created an enormous amount of interest.

Un héros très discret did respectable business at the French box-office and attracted a good deal of criticism because of its story and its view of French history of the 1940s. It tells the story of a man who 're-invents' himself, generating a new identity as a resistance hero during the Liberation of France in 1944-5 and it can be seen as a gentle, but effective, satire on the national self-delusion about the experience of occupation and resistance. As a result, critics from the right have seen the film as insulting to the memory and critics from the left have argued that it does not go far enough. Part of the interest in the film is also based on the appearance of Mathieu Kassovitz in the lead role. Kassovitz in 1996 was a rising star of French cinema, who as a director made the youth picture La Haine in 1995 and who could be relied upon to give the French media some good soundbites about contemporary culture. Re-titled A Self Made Hero, the film was eventually released in the UK in April 1997. Here, it was treated very much as an 'art' film and assumed to be of minority interest. Nevertheless, it played to good audiences and during the first couple of weeks of its release entered the list of Top 15 films in the UK, competing with the likes of Star Wars and The English Patient. This may surprise some of Audiard's current fans in the UK who have been attracted by his last two crime films. Un héros très discret may not be a polar as such, but its thematic of the 'outsider' helped by older and wiser father figures places it neatly next to Un prophète.

Historical background

The narrative follows the life of the hero, Albert Dehoussë, from his early teens in the 1930s through the Second World War and into the immediate post-war period. Woven into this story is what appears to be a documentary made recently in which various witnesses comment on the Albert Dehoussë they knew. We are also shown interviews with the 'real' Albert (played by a famous French film star of the 1960s and 1970s, Jean-Louis Trintignant), who tells us something about his successes during the last fifty years.

Defeat in 1940

At the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, the French armed forces occupied a complex series of fortifications along the eastern border with Germany. Known as the Maginot Line, this was expected to act as a major deterrent to any German advance. But the German army had learned many lessons from the stalemate of the trenches in the 1914-18 war and in June 1940 swiftly moved squadrons of tanks through Holland and Belgium around the northern edge of the Maginot Line and into North East France. With the Germans heading for Paris, and large French, British and Belgian armies trapped on the coast near Dunkirk, the French government sued for peace. This massive military defeat was a terrible blow to French pride and to the honour of the French armed forces.

Vichy France

After the armistice, the Germans occupied Northern France and the Atlantic coastal area. The remainder of the country was governed from the small town of Vichy in Central France, with an administration led by the World War I hero, Marshal Petain. This 'Vichy' government was an anomaly during the war. It administered the whole of France, although in the occupied zone, only with German agreement. In
the south, most people led a relatively ‘normal’ life. However, the true extent of ‘collaboration’ between the Vichy government and the German authorities is still difficult to determine. After 1942, with the evident threat of an Anglo-American invasion, the Axis powers moved in to control the whole country. The Germans then controlled all but the extreme South-East of France which came under Italian control.

At the time of the surrender in 1940, France had considerable military resources based overseas in colonies, especially in North and West Africa. In London, a French officer, General de Gaulle, set up the ‘Free French’ forces with the intention of releasing these resources and recruiting French soldiers who had been able to escape from German-occupied territories. The large French naval forces in African ports had posed a threat to Allied shipping and many were seized or destroyed by the British – precipitating the establishment of the Vichy regime and its claim to these overseas territories. Thus for the remainder of the war there would be two French governments – in Vichy and in London – on opposing sides. Vichy France gave the impression of being ‘neutral’ and provided the perfect location for romantic stories such as that presented in the famous film Casablanca, set in French Morocco.

**The Free French**

Free French forces, later termed ‘La France Combattante’, played a significant role in the Allied liberation of Europe and in 1944-5 helped to liberate France itself. The de Gaulle administration was recognised by the Allies as the true French government and was installed in Paris as such by October 1944. Throughout the period of occupation, a resistance movement was active in France and during the liberation, resistance fighters fought openly against German forces and ‘collaborators’. The period immediately following liberation saw l’épuration – the purge of collaborationists – in which thousands of those accused were summarily executed or humiliated.

**France as a ‘great power’ again**

In 1945, at the end of the European War, France again found itself a major power and when the demarcation lines were drawn in occupied Germany, the French military were given control of the central part of Western Germany (with the British to the north and the Americans to the south). French power was organised from the spa town of Baden Baden.

A new republic (the Fourth Republic) was constituted in 1946 and for the next twelve years French society attempted to come to terms with the aftermath of war. The post-war period was difficult for the Socialist governments elected after 1947. Charles de Gaulle (the war hero, who rather like Churchill in Britain had not been involved in the immediate post-war government) re-appeared in 1958 at a time of crisis over rebellion in France’s North African territories. His return established the Fifth Republic, which many commentators saw as a conscious attempt to restore French pride and national identity. Although de Gaulle died in 1970, his influence remains and the current opposition party in France is ‘gaulist’ to a certain extent.

**Uncertain French memories of 1940-45**

Every European country had problems in re-adjusting to peacetime existence and rebuilding society after 1945. Most countries were clear about the problem. In Britain there were heroes to be accommodated and debts to be repaid to the Americans. In Germany and Italy, there was defeat to be faced. In the smaller countries which had been occupied it was more problematic. There were questions about who had resisted, or who had collaborated and in some cases what had been the attitude to Nazi policies concerning local Jewish communities. But in countries like Holland, where these questions were asked and the issue has to some extent still not been properly resolved, the situation has never been quite as difficult as in France. France was ‘occupied’ and ‘defeated’ – but she was also one of the victors, invited back to the table of ‘Big Powers’ in 1945. For many French people in the South, the war period must have passed relatively calmly. For others things changed quite dramatically. As the director of Un héro tres discret, Jacques Audiard said: “… overnight [in 1944] we were no longer the defeated, we were the conquerors, we were no longer collaborators, we were Resistance fighters …”

The consequence was that for the next thirty years the uncertainty about what actually happened was maintained as a kind of national amnesia. Many people claimed to have been in the resistance while at the same time fingerling their enemies as collaborators (but not usually in public). Commentators pointed out that if all the stories were believed, everyone in 1944 was either a resistance hero or a collaborator. This clearly wasn’t the case and contemporary historians tend towards the view that the actual numbers of active resistance fighters and collaborators was quite small – most French people were relatively passive in the way that they dealt with the war.

**French cultural life since 1945**

This uncertainty had profound effects for French literature, and cinema and television in particular. A useful source for analysis of these effects is French Culture since 1945 (ed Cook 1993). Rachel Edwards in this book describes the dominant forms of literature after the war as falling into distinct periods or trends. In the first, littérature engagée, she sees writers compelled to show commitment to left-wing
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What is at issue here is: "what does it mean to be French and to live with a past which recently, how would we feel to be young Bosnians or Serbs in the aftermath of civil war?"

One approach to studying Un héros très discret may be to ask ourselves what could be the effects of particular memories or official histories of war in different countries. In Britain, for instance, there clearly have been problems for a country which 'won' the war, but in which French youth have about what it means to be a French citizen in the 1990s. Part of this will be worked out in their attitudes towards what generation's sense of national pride – certainly in evidence in French government policy in the 1960s and early 1970s.

By 1996 it was over fifty years since the war in Europe had ended – yet it was still possible to generate debate about what happened during the war and how social and cultural life changed after the war ended. Debates about the investigation of war criminals were still current in the UK and in France, the revelations about President François Mitterrand's wartime past, which emerged in the years before his death were front page news. These revelations are referenced in Un héros très discret, through the use of the 'documentary' inserts which suggest that the Albert Dehousse character, despite being 'found out' could still go on to achieve high political office.

In what ways might these debates have an impact on the relations between young people and their parents? – this is one possible approach to Un héros très discret.

**National identity and youth**

The depiction of France in wartime in this film and others is one of a number of factors which will in some way help to shape the ideas which French youth have about what it means to be a French citizen in the 1990s. Part of this will be worked out in their attitudes towards their parents' and their grandparents' generations. The history outlined above suggests that the current generation of French parents might have themselves grown up in the 1950s and 1960s, believing a myth about resistance. In turn, this will perhaps have been part of that generation's sense of national pride – certainly in evidence in French government policy in the 1960s and early 1970s.

It is dangerous to 'read off' attitudes and beliefs from characterisations in films and novels – films are not simply 'slices of reality', they are carefully constructed to produce particular meanings. But they do prompt us to think about issues in particular ways.

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Young people in the UK may be relatively unconcerned by this lack of international status, but it is a problem for older people and may be linked to current debates about our relationship to Europe. (In a contradiction, it was also noticeable that many young people were easily caught up in the war against Argentina in 1982, whereas those with memories of war were sometimes more inclined to caution.) We might also consider the impact of the first American failure in war, in Vietnam in 1975 – how do you cope with defeat, when you are still the most powerful nation on earth? Most recently, how would we feel to be young Bosnians or Serbs in the aftermath of civil war? What is at issue here is: "what does it mean to be French and to live with a past which includes the myth of resistance?"

Roy Stafford