

Daniel Cordier, French Resistance Hero, Is Dead at 100

Mr. Cordier was assistant to the legendary Jean Moulin, who unified Resistance groups in Nazi-occupied France.

By **Alan Cowell**

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Daniel Cordier, one of the last surviving operatives of the wartime French Resistance, who parachuted into his country from exile to run networks of agents and maintain covert radio communications in a cat-and-mouse duel with Hitler's Gestapo, died on Friday in Cannes, France. He was 100.

His death was confirmed by the Ministry of Armed Forces and President Emmanuel Macron, who said in a statement: "When France was in peril, he and his fellow fighters took all the risks so that France stayed true to itself. We owe them our freedom and our honor."

After the war, Mr. Cordier sought to distance himself from his activities in occupied France and became instead a successful modern art collector and dealer. But, inexorably, the war years drew him back, this time as a historian defending the record of Jean Moulin, Charles de Gaulle's most senior representative in occupied France and organizer of the French Resistance, whom he had served as a personal assistant in 1942 and 1943.

The Nazi occupation branded deep and complex scars in the French psyche, fusing the humiliation of military defeat and the shame of collaboration with the heroic myths and chronicles of the Resistance. In 1944, Mr. Cordier was honored in France as a Companion of the Liberation — a title awarded to about 1,000 Resistance figures — and on June 18, 2018, President Emmanuel Macron elevated him to the highest level of the Légion d'Honneur.

The ceremony marked the 78th anniversary of a celebrated appeal from London by de Gaulle, the Free French leader, to resist the Nazi occupation despite the armistice sought by Marshal Philippe Pétain, who became the head of state of what was known as Vichy France.

Mr. Cordier's credentials had not always been so illustrious. In his early years he had been under the influence of a stepfather who inculcated extreme right-wing, monarchist and anti-Semitic views into his charge. Observing the Nazi occupation changed his mind, he said.

Following the fall of Paris in June 1940, Mr. Cordier's ardent patriotism led him to flee France to join the Gaullist Free French movement in London. After military training, he was sent back to France in 1942 as an undercover operative in Lyon and Paris.

Mr. Cordier had traveled from Lyon pretending to be a journalist, he wrote in a memoir published in 2009. His mission was to prepare for the arrival of his boss, code-named "Rex," and for a secret meeting that was supposed to forge a united front among Resistance groups.

He had been shocked to see German soldiers photographing one another at the Arc de Triomphe. But, as he headed toward a covert encounter with a fellow operative at a cafe on the Champs Élysées, he was even more stunned to see an old Jewish man and a child with yellow stars on their overcoats.

"The shock of this vision plunges me into an unbearable shame," he wrote in his memoir, "Alias Caracalla." (Gallimard, 2009)

At first he wanted to rush up to the people he saw and embrace them to seek forgiveness. At that moment, though, Mr. Cordier recognized the operative he was scheduled to meet, walking toward him. "His presence leads me back to reality: I am not in Paris to care for my conscience," he wrote.

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“For sure,” Mr. Cordier wrote, “the Resistance is not a propitious place for the culture of remorse.”

Daniel Bouyjou-Cordier was born into a wealthy middle class family in Bordeaux on Aug. 10, 1920. His mother, Jeanne Gauthier, divorced his father when he was 4 years old and remarried Charles Cordier, a local industrialist.



A picture released by the Musée de l'Ordre de la Libération showing Mr. Cordier in 1945 in Paris. Musée De L'Ordre De La Libération, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

He was educated at an all-boy Catholic boarding school in Arcachon, near Bordeaux, where, in a memoir — “Les Feux de Saint-Elme” (Gallimard, 2014) — he traced a sexual awakening marked by attraction to his fellow pupils. In 2009 he came out as gay.

“Even if I have never hidden from it, I have never spoken about it,” he said in an interview with *Le Monde*, “because these are difficult things to write about, especially for a man of my generation.”

In his teenage years, Mr. Cordier became an organizer for the extreme right and monarchist *Action Française* inspired by Charles Maurras, a writer and politician who opposed republican government. He was a secret admirer of Europe’s fascist leaders and yet nurtured an equally unspoken passion for the works of the avant-garde and hedonistic André Gide.

As the scion of a wealthy family, he divided his time between summer vacations in the Atlantic resort of Biarritz and winters skiing — a lifestyle that came to an abrupt end on Sept. 3, 1939, with the declaration of war by France and Britain. In June the following year, German troops overran Paris; Pétain called for an armistice and established the collaborationist Vichy government in the southern part of France; and de Gaulle urged his followers to keep up the fight.

With German troops advancing south, Mr. Cordier and a group of other young Frenchmen in the port of Bayonne boarded the *Leopold II*, a Belgian freighter whose captain agreed to take them in the hold of his vessel in return for a payment from Mr. Cordier’s stepfather. Initially, the cargo ship was supposed to steam to North Africa, but it changed course at sea and docked in Cornwall at the southwestern tip of England.

In London, Mr. Cordier and other fugitives were received by de Gaulle. “I will not congratulate you for coming here: you did your duty,” he told them, according to Mr. Cordier’s memoirs, “When France is in agony, her children are duty bound to save her.”

Mr. Cordier returned to France in July 1942 as a covert intelligence operative, part of the so-called Central Bureau of Intelligence and Operations, known by its initials in French as the B.C.R.A., that acted with British support as the main channel between de Gaulle’s Free French and individual Resistance groups.

Armed with a revolver and a knife, and carrying documents for Rex in Lyon, Mr. Cordier parachuted from a British airplane flying low over the French countryside, landing in a clump of gorse.

He was not aware that Rex was in fact the debonair Jean Moulin, effectively de Gaulle’s viceroy in occupied France, who almost immediately recruited Mr. Cordier as his personal assistant after inviting him to dinner and asking: “How was your journey?”

At that time, the ranking Gestapo official in Lyon was Klaus Barbie — known as the Butcher of Lyon — who in 1987 was sentenced to life imprisonment by a French court on charges of crimes against humanity. Barbie’s brutal campaign against the Resistance only underlined the perils facing Moulin and Mr. Cordier.

Moulin’s principal mission was to nurture unity among wary Resistance groups. But in June 1943, he was arrested at a meeting with other underground leaders that had been betrayed to the Gestapo, most likely by a traitorous member of the Resistance. He died after weeks of torture by Barbie himself.

Mr. Cordier remained in France as an underground operative until March 1944, when he fled across the Pyrenees to Spain and was interned briefly by the Franco regime before traveling on to London. He returned to Paris in October 1944 after the city’s liberation.

Mr. Cordier’s relationship with the man he knew as Rex seems to have been complex, built partly on hero worship and partly on a fierce loyalty reinforced by the mystique of his anonymity. Moulin was two decades older than Mr. Cordier, a product of the French Left and a connoisseur of modern art. In some ways, Mr. Cordier was a kind of disciple.

During their time together, Moulin and Mr. Cordier adopted a cover story — among others — that they were art dealers, according to the Sotheby’s auction house, which planned a sale of works collected by Mr. Cordier on Sept. 27, 2018. “Cordier became Moulin’s gallery assistant, and his education in art — which was vital for his own cover to stand up to scrutiny if he was ever questioned — had begun,” Sotheby’s said before the sale.

In an interview with *Le Monde* in 2018, Mr. Cordier recalled that “the disappearance of my boss, Jean Moulin,” had made it “painful to live with this memory, really too painful” and for that reason he had resolved after World War II to “efface” those chapters of his life.

Moulin had taught him a lot about modern art, and Mr. Cordier became a collector and gallerist until the late 1970s. But his years in the Resistance returned to haunt him when Henri Frenay, a fellow operative, suggested that Moulin had been a Soviet spy.

“That was quite simply a lie,” Mr. Cordier told *Le Monde* in 2018.

He embarked on a remarkably detailed biography of Moulin that appeared in three volumes of around 1,000 pages each between 1989 and 1993 and a fourth volume of roughly the same length in 1999.

Only after the liberation of France did Mr. Cordier discover who Rex, his mentor, had been. It was a bitter moment. He had always believed “Rex” would turn out to be “from the highest levels of politics, or diplomacy, or painting,” he wrote in his memoirs in 2009. Instead, he discovered that Moulin had been an “unknown” provincial administrator.

“I had always thought that the revelation of Rex’s name alone would justify the secret cult that I had built around his memory,” he wrote. But “because he was a nobody, I worked to keep our relationship a secret” until Mr. Frenay’s accusations “obliged me to reveal the truth of those long-ago days.”

In the interview with Le Monde, Mr. Cordier was asked why Moulin had made such a deep impression. “Perhaps I can reply like this,” he said. “He made an impression on me because he chose me.”

Yan Zhuang and Maud Bodoukian contributed reporting.