

→ INTRODUCING



# EXISTENTIALISM

## A GRAPHIC GUIDE



RICHARD APPIGNANESI & OSCAR ZARATE

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# A question of absurdity

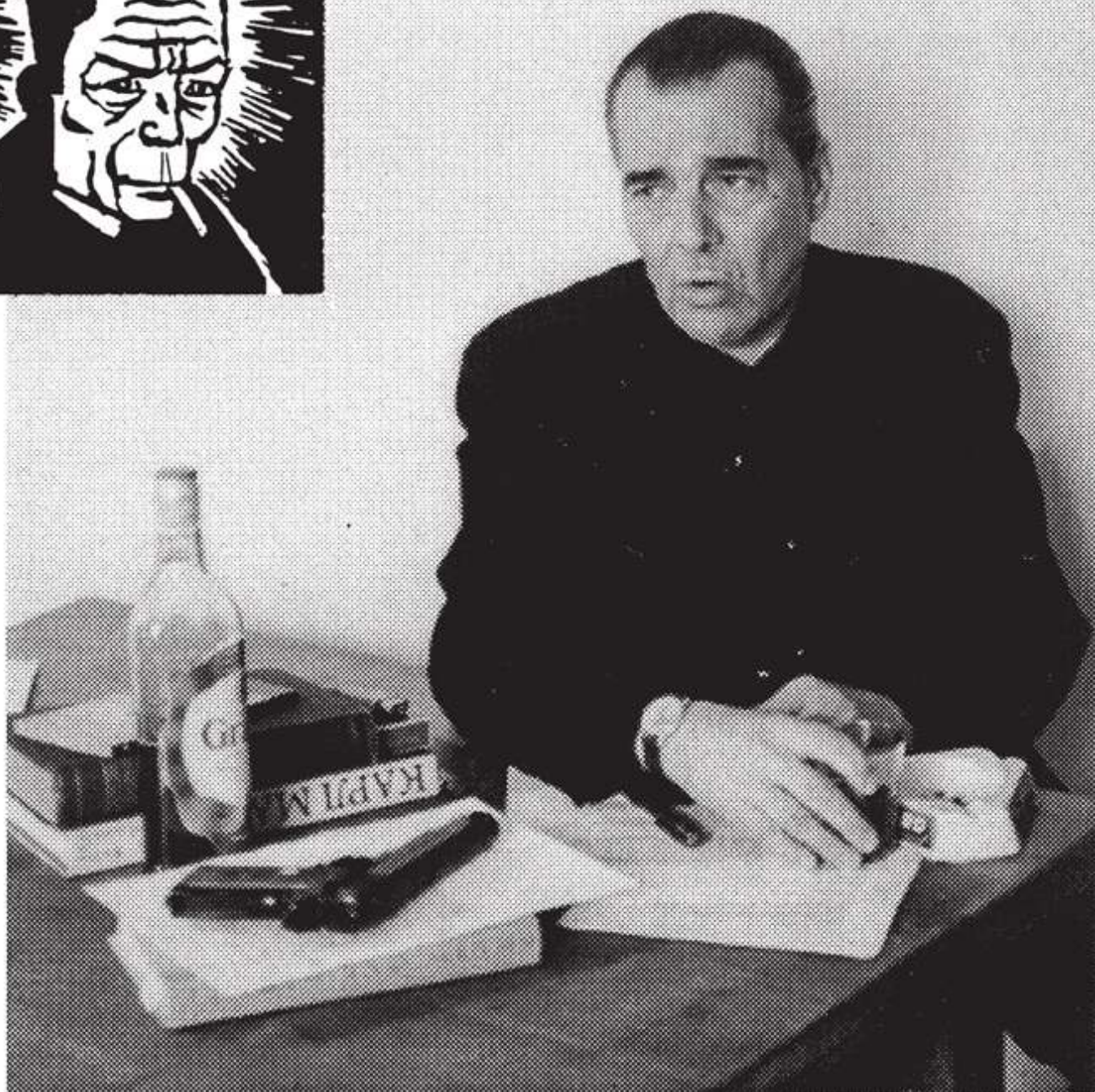
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“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” So begins **Albert Camus** (1913-60) in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). He stiffens the dose by quoting Nietzsche: “a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example.”



IN SHORT,  
THE ANSWER I  
GIVE COULD BE  
MY LAST ...

SO, I HAD  
BETTER FIND A  
REASON FOR  
LIVING.



But then, Camus at once sees that “a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying.” In either case, a sacrifice might be at stake. The question is – must life have a meaning to be lived? He concludes no, *in view of the absurd*, “it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning.”

# Into the night and fog

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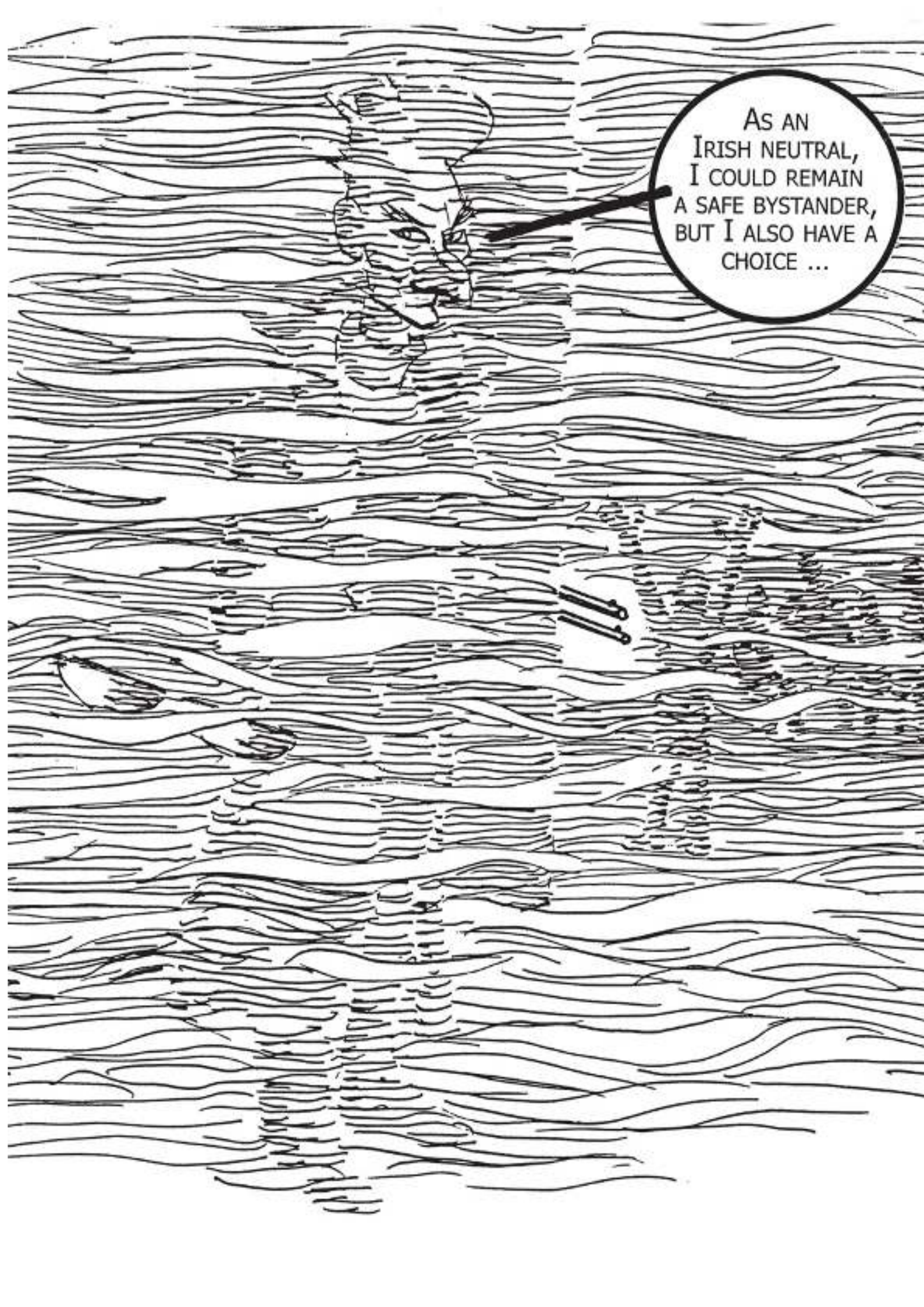
Camus has chosen an “absurdist” estimate of living at a dangerous time, in 1942, in defeated Paris under Nazi Occupation. Others, like himself, are members of the Resistance, an “army of shadows” – men and women who flit unseen in acts of sabotage – always in peril of arrest by the Gestapo, torture and death.



AT ANY STREET  
CORNER THE FEELING  
OF ABSURDITY CAN  
STRIKE ANY MAN IN  
THE FACE ...

Absurdity, he says, “in its distressing nudity, in its *light without effulgence* ...” Of course, there is a sub-text to Camus’ essay on absurdism in this time and place, one which evades the policing of Occupation censorship and is itself an act of defiant resistance.

Absurdity had the evidence of terror. In a fit of Wagnerian megalomania, Hitler issued the *Nacht und Nebel Erlass* – “Night and Fog Decree” – on 7 December 1941, reserved for the inhabitants of the conquered Western territories. It ordered that anyone endangering German security would be seized and made to “vanish without trace into the night and fog of the unknown in Germany.” In effect, deportation and death.



AS AN  
IRISH NEUTRAL,  
I COULD REMAIN  
A SAFE BYSTANDER,  
BUT I ALSO HAVE A  
CHOICE ...

The dramatist **Samuel Beckett** (1906-89) in Paris at the time, guaranteed safety by Ireland's neutrality, chose to imperil himself by joining the Resistance. Why? Because to forgo common sense and accept absurdity in these circumstances is rectitude.

# Vichy water into blood

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France surrendered to the German invasion after only six weeks' fighting. Without allies – Britain unprepared for war, America neutral, and Hitler now master of Europe – there was no option. On 21 June 1940, **Marshal Philippe Pétain** (1856-1951) signed an armistice which divided France into two zones – one controlled by the Germans, the other “non-occupied”, governed from the spa town of Vichy, famous for its curative waters. Political compromise is one thing, quite another was the Vichy government's policy of *active collaboration* with Nazi Germany.





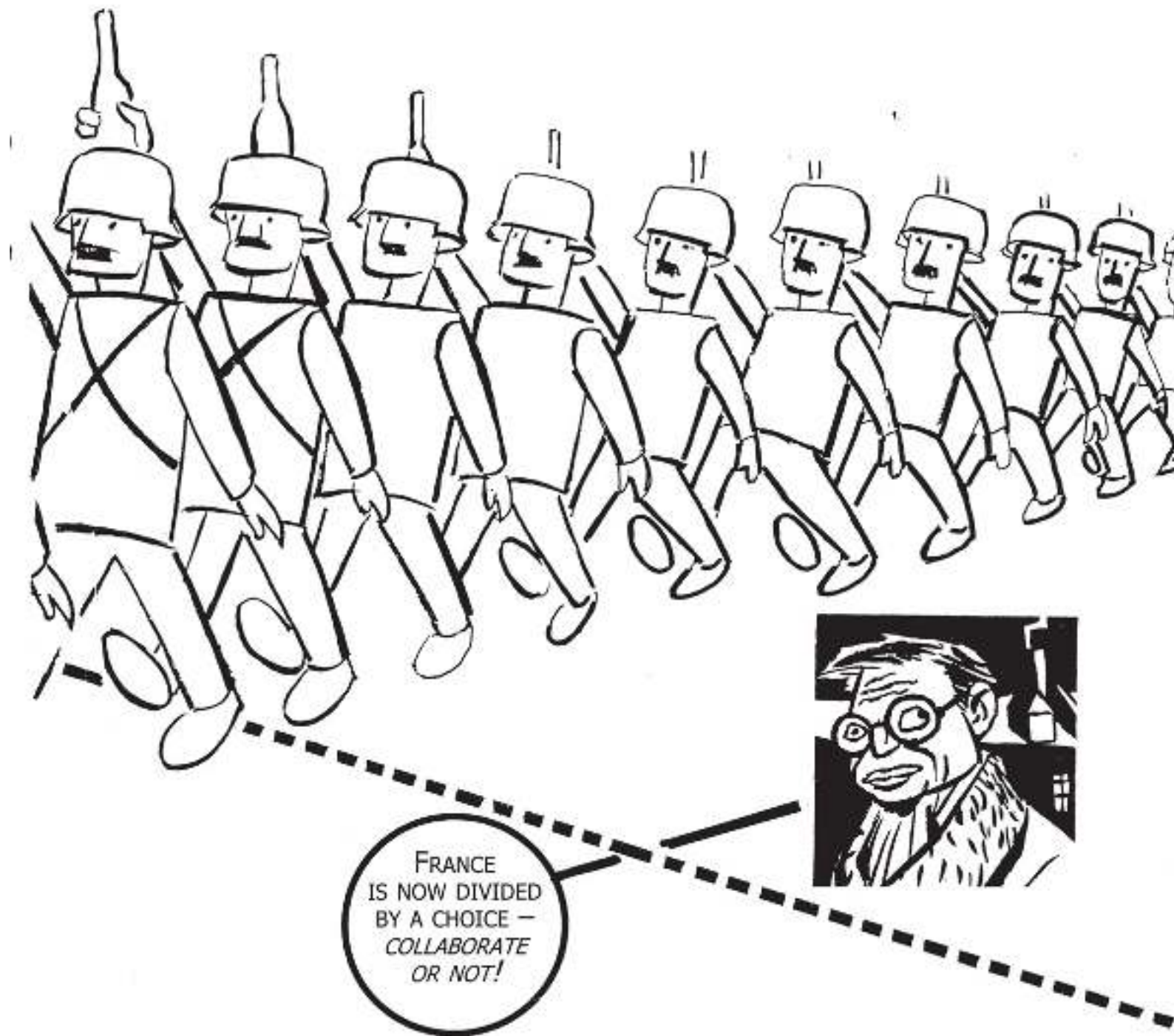
THE VICHY  
COLLABORATORS  
SERVE AS HITLER'S  
HENCHMEN ...

BUT IT  
WON'T GIVE  
FRANCE ANY EQUAL  
FOOTING IN HIS  
EYES.



# Republic of silence

A right-wing element in France seized on the Occupation as the ideal opportunity to adopt Hitler's "Final Solution" for its own unwelcome Jews and Communists – carried out with such zeal that it surprised even the Germans. Vichy transubstantiated the water of political compromise into Nazi blood racialism and with that fed the "shower rooms" of Hitler's concentration camps.



**Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-80) at this time remarked: "Never have we been freer than under the German Occupation ... This total responsibility in total solitude, wasn't this the revelation of our freedom?" (From the essay "La République du silence", 1944.)

# Light without effulgence

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In such “dark light”, does life go on as before? Perhaps one’s eyes adjust to reality in the negative. In 1942, **Picasso** (1881-1973) paints his “Still Life with Skull of a Bull”, carries on his affair with Dora Maar, and deals in illegal currency. He too enjoys safe neutrality, as a Spanish national, but unlike Beckett does not join the Resistance ...



COWARDICE?  
I CANNOT JUDGE.

NOR CAN  
I UNDERSTAND WHY  
THE URBANE, AESTHETICAL  
DRIEU LA ROCHELLE  
BECAME A  
COLLABORATIONIST ...



The novelist **Pierre Drieu La Rochelle** (1893-1945) described Occupied Paris as a raped female: “from the central avenue of the Tuileries I can view the Obelisk of Luxor in the Place de la Concorde *piercing* the Arc de Triomphe ...” The sexual allusion is fully conscious. Was this reason enough for him to embrace the perspiring masculinity of Nazism?

# Bergson's resistance

Nor can I fathom the vile anti-Semitic Collaborationism of such talented novelists as **Louis-Ferdinand Céline** (1894-1961) and **Robert Brasillach** (b. 1909, executed 1945), editor of the sewer-rat fascist paper *Je Suis Partout*. The philosopher **Henri Bergson** (1859-1941) had long foreseen "the formidable wave of anti-Semitism about to break upon the world." Bergson arose mortally ill from his sickbed to register as a Jew in accord with Vichy government law. He refused the exemption offered him.



I AM A JEW  
AND WOULD RATHER  
PERISH AS ONE THAN  
CONCEAL MYSELF.

Is there an image more nauseating than to witness gendarmes of the French Republic and SS troopers  
“fraternally joined” in the mass deportations of Jews?

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# Swimming in polluted waters

Paris “after dark” reveals every species of player. Few are actively “Resistants”; most will be *attentistes*, those who literally *wait* to see which side will prevail before choosing between Allies and Nazis. Self-preservation in war-time is indeed a doubtful business, but I can name two at least who chose Resistance – Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre – both so-called Existentialists, if they are in fact really that. They meet in the office of the underground newspaper *Combat*...



There is an obscure sense of “betrayal” at the heart of Existentialism. Let’s consider the case of



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