

Biography of Joseph Joffo

- Joseph Joffo was born on 23 April 1931 in the XVII^e arrondissement of Paris, son of Roman Joffo and Anna Markoff.
- At the age of 14, Joseph left school and joined his older brothers in the family *salon de coiffure*.
- Joseph's early childhood in Paris is recounted in his novel *Agates et calots* (1995) and his life immediately after the war is recounted in his novel *Baby-foot* (1977).
- *Un sac de billes* was Joffo's first novel. It was published in 1973.
- The novel was awarded literary recognition by the Académie française in 1974.
- The story of his mother's journey from tsarist Russia to France is related in Joffo's novel *Anna et son orchestre* (1974).
- To date, *Un sac de billes* has sold over 20 million copies worldwide.
- *Un sac de billes* is often set as a key text in the educational programme of European students studying the Holocaust.
- *Un sac de billes* has been released twice as a film (in 1975 and in 2017) and has also been released as a two-volume graphic novel (*Tomé 1*, 2011 and *Tomé 2*, 2012).
- Joseph Joffo now divides his time between Épeigné-sur-Dême, Paris and Cannes.



Joseph Joffo

Tips for assessment

In an examination essay answer, you should only include details about the author's background in relation to how it might have affected what is included in the novel. You also need to be careful not to include details in your answers which are not revealed by the novel itself. For example, although they are named in the 2017 film adaptation of *Un sac de billes*, the names of Joffo's parents are never given in the novel.

Upgrade

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Historical and cultural context

Porte de Clignancourt, Paris, in the 1940s

The XVII^e arrondissement of Paris includes Pigalle and Montmartre. In the 1940s the district had a large population of immigrants from all over Europe, including a significant number of exiled Jewish families who had fled the persecution of the pogroms in Eastern Europe. Joffo captures the **eclectic mix** of inhabitants in his description of Ménil Epstein in the opening pages of the novel.

New quotation

On raconte qu'elle a fui à pied à travers l'Europe, de pogromes en pogromes, pour venir échouer dans ce coin du XVII^e arrondissement où elle a retrouvé les fuyards de l'est: Russes, Roumains, Tchèques, compagnons de Trotsky, intellectuels, artisans. (Chapter 7)

By the time of the occupation of France in 1940, there were over 300,000 Jews living in France. Approximately 200,000 of them lived in Paris, in districts which were typically like the XVII^e arrondissement. Fewer than half of French Jews at this time held French citizenship.

Occupied France, 1940–1944

La convention d'armistice, which suspended the fighting between the German and French armies, was signed on 22 June, 1940, after crushing defeats in May and June of that year. As a result, the country was divided into an occupied northern zone (*la zone occupée*) and an unoccupied zone in the south (*la zone libre*). **French sovereignty** was to be maintained over the whole of the territory (including the occupied zone) and a French government was established in Vichy, in the unoccupied zone, under the authority of Marshal Pétain. The armistice stipulated that French authorities in the occupied zone would defer to the German military administration and that Germany would exercise the rights of an occupying power within this zone. The unoccupied zone in the south is the first main destination for Jo and Maurice when they flee Paris.

eclectic mix *la composition eclectique*: a diverse mix of nationalities, religions and cultures.

French sovereignty *la souveraineté française*: unrestricted power of the French state to determine its own affairs.

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Anti-Semitic legislation

The occupying German administration published its first anti-Jewish legislation (*les ordonnances allemandes prises contre les Juifs*) on 27 September, 1940. This was in the form of a **census** to define and identify who was a Jew. By October various businesses were listed as proscribed (or forbidden) activities (*les entreprises proscrites*) and an extension of the law established in Germany in 1938 meant that all Jewish shopkeepers were compelled to display the words 'Jewish business' (*Yiddish Geschäft*). In the windows of their premises, as Jo describes in Chapter 1, 'By the end of the summer of 1941 all radios belonging to Jews had been confiscated, followed by their telephones and bicycles. A curfew (*un couvre-feu*) was imposed on Jews between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m., and all public parks and theatres were closed to Jews. New restrictions were imposed, on what seemed like a weekly basis, until Jews had been barred from public swimming pools, restaurants, cafés, cinemas and concert halls. Anti-Semitic propaganda was widespread in the newspapers, as well as on posters displayed in the streets and promoted in anti-Semitic exhibitions that were officially organised. In May 1942 all French Jews were ordered to identify themselves by wearing a yellow star of David on their outer clothing. For Jo and Maurice, wearing these stars to school sees them immediately singled out by their classmates and prompts their father to advise them to leave Paris.

Key quotation

Rue Marcadet, il y avait une affiche au-dessus du marchand de chaussures, juste à l'angle, une très grande affiche en couleurs. Dessus, on voyait une araignée qui rampait sur le globe terrestre, une grosse mygale velue avec une tête d'homme, une sale guenille avec des yeux fendus, des oreilles en chou-fleur, une bouche lipique et un nez terrible en lame de cimeterre. En bas c'était écrit quelque chose du genre, « Le Juif cherchant à posséder le monde ». (Chapter 3)

Round-ups of Jews (*les rafles*) began in May 1941: collecting Jews and sending them to transit camps for later transportation and deportation to the extermination camps in Eastern Europe. These round-ups and deportations continued until as late as August 1944, by which time nearly 76,000 French Jews had been deported, including Jews from Vichy France and the unoccupied zone where anti-Semitism became particularly aggressive.

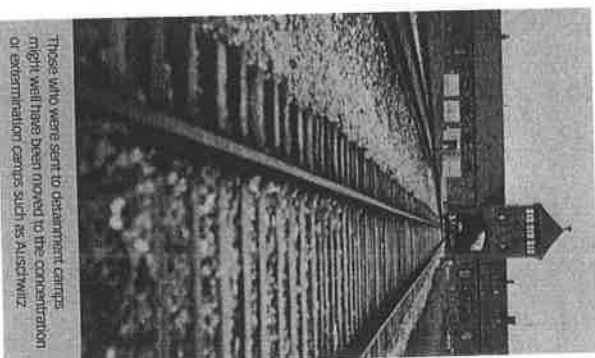
Only 2,500 of those deported would survive. After his arrest in Nice, Joseph's father Roman Jofo was deported by Convoy No. 62 in November 1943 and died in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, although this is not revealed in the novel itself. Jo and Maurice escape many of these round-ups on their travels often helped by strangers.

census *le recensement*; official count or survey of a population

La rafle du Vél d'Hiv

The most notorious round-up of French Jews was a joint operation between the German and the French administrations. It was code-named *Opération Vent Pritanier* ('Operation Spring Breeze'). It took place across 16 and 17 July 1942, when nearly 13,000 Jews (including more than 4,000 children) were arrested and interned. They were held either at the transit camp in Drancy in the north-east suburbs of Paris, or in the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* in the XIV^e *arrondissement*. There, they were held without adequate food and water (there was only one tap), and without sanitation, as the toilets, which had windows giving access to possible escape routes, had been locked and blocked. Five days later they were shipped by rail in cattle trucks to Auschwitz. Only 811 of those arrested survived the round-up and subsequent deportation to return to France after the war.

On the occasion of the 53rd anniversary of the round-up in July 1995, President Chirac ruled that it was time that France faced up to its past and he acknowledged the role that the state had played in the persecution of Jews and other victims of the German occupation. He offered a public apology on behalf of the French nation.



Those who were sent to destination camps might well have been moved to the concentration or extermination camps such as Auschwitz.

Activité 1

Traduisez en anglais cet extrait du discours de Jacques Chirac qui condamne la collaboration de l'administration française pour ses actions dans l'opération Vent Primantier.

Il est, dans la vie d'une nation, des moments qui blessent la mémoire, et l'idée que l'on se fait de son pays. [...]

Il est difficile de les évoquer [...] parce que ces heures noires soulignent à jamais notre histoire, et sont une injure à notre passé et à nos traditions. Oui, la folie criminelle de l'occupant a été secondée par des Français, par l'état français.

Il y a 53 ans, le 16 juillet 1942, 450 policiers et gendarmes français, sous l'autorité de leurs chefs, répondaient aux exigences des nazis.

Ce jour-là, dans la capitale et en région parisienne, près de dix mille hommes, femmes et enfants juifs furent arrêtés à leur domicile, au petit matin, et rassemblés dans les commissariats de police. [...]

La France, patrie des Lumières* et des Droits de l'Homme, terre d'accueil et d'asile, la France, ce jour-là, accomplissait l'irréparable. Manquant à sa parole, elle livrait ses protégés à leurs bourreaux. [...]

* Les Lumières (17th Age of Enlightenment (17th - 18th Century))
Jacques Chirac, *président de la République*, 1995

Activité 2

Faites des recherches pour trouver des renseignements supplémentaires sur la rafle du Vél d'Hiv et les autres rafles des juifs en France. Utilisez ce que vous trouvez pour préparer une présentation à l'écrit ou à l'oral en français.

Activité 3

Utilisez un dictionnaire pour trouver une traduction appropriée pour chaque expression dans la liste ci-dessous.

- a) la traque des juifs
- b) les ordonnances allemandes
- c) les convois de déportation
- d) les camps d'extermination
- e) la folie criminelle
- f) les exigences nazies
- g) la législation antisémite
- h) une terre d'accueil

Life in occupied France for non-Jews

Life for non-Jews under the German occupation was not always easy. Throughout the whole of France there were food shortages and Allied bombings to contend with, particularly in areas close to factories and in ports. The working class faced difficulties with limited access to the black market which, for some of the wealthier French people, provided a way to counter the harshness of strict rationing.

The novel shows how important the black market also was to the survival of individuals, as Maurice in particular is able to earn money for himself and Jo through his trading. Vehicles and horses were regularly requisitioned by the Germans and fuel was scarce. New clothing was in short supply, the boys, for example, were unable to obtain warm coats when they moved to a colder area in Chapter 10. The working class were also subject to the *Service du Travail Obligatoire*, the compulsory service as a workforce, which was established by the regulations of the Vichy government, but used by Nazi Germany as a means to compensate for its loss of manpower in Germany, with an increasing number of soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front. It is estimated that approximately 650,000 French workers were sent to Germany between June 1942 and July 1944.

Rail transport was often disrupted by delays due to bombardments and the sabotage of supply lines by the underground French Resistance.

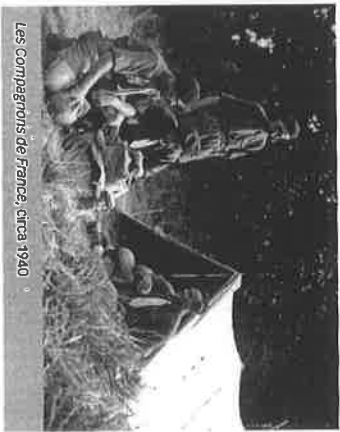
to be requisitioned (être réquisitionné/ée) to be taken by official requisition demand

Key quotation

- D'ailleurs, où que vous alliez je ne peux pas vous dire quand vous arriverez ni même si vous arriverez parce que ...
- Ses bras en croix, il produit avec sa bouche un bruit de moteur et de bombes.
- Vous voyez ce que je veux dire?
- [...]
- Avec un clin d'œil il ajoute:
- Et il n'y a pas que les bombardements, il y a aussi les ...
- De ses deux poings réunis il appuie sur un détonateur imaginaire, gonfle ses joues, devient écarlate.
- Braoumi Vous voyez ce que je veux dire?
- [...]
- Et il n'y a pas que les sabotages! Il y a les ralentissements, les arrêts, les déraillements, les voies déboulonnées et puis également ...
- Les deux malins en porte-voix il se met à ululer sinistrement:
- Vous voyez ce que je veux dire? (Chapter 10)

Collaboration

Some French citizens, whether driven by nationalism, ethnic hatred, anti-Semitism or just opportunism, engaged in collaboration with the German occupying forces. We meet one such individual in Chapter 11: Monsieur Manceiller. Individual collaborators often worked as informers, denouncing Jews and their families who were in hiding. The Vichy government itself collaborated closely with the German administration and was actively involved in the round-up and deportation of French Jews, opening its own transit camps to assist the Germans.



Les Compagnons de France, circa 1940

The Vichy government was also responsible for setting up youth camps. In particular the *Compagnons de France*, which was founded in 1940 to promote exercise, outdoor activities and communal living for boys aged 15–20. From 1942 onwards, Jewish boys were excluded from these camps as the Vichy regime became more openly anti-Semitic. Boys who attended these camps wore a uniform which consisted of a dark blue shirt and dark blue long trousers or shorts. The boys also wore navy blue berets, leather belts and ties. It is interesting to note that, once France was entirely under German control (September 1943), these camps became an increasing source of resistance to the Nazi regime and often provided temporary safe havens for Jewish boys. Joffo describes such a camp in Chapter 10, run by Monsieur Subinagui, who provides safe refuge for Jo and Maurice.

Activité 4

Imaginez que vous vous êtes inscrit dans un camp des *Compagnons de France*. Faites des recherches supplémentaires sur cette organisation puis décrivez une journée typique pour vous. N'oubliez pas de mentionner l'uniforme que vous devez porter! Écrivez environ 100 mots.

In 1943 the Vichy government set up a collaborationist paramilitary police force. Its members were known as the *Milice* and their primary aim was to work alongside the occupying forces to combat all forms of French resistance. Members of the *Milice* were effectively the Vichy counterparts of the German Gestapo. Faced with the very real possibility of being 'sold' (sometimes literally) to the German authorities by collaborators, informers or the *Milice*, the inhabitants of many towns and communities throughout France, including non-Jews, lived in a state of constant fear and suspicion.

Key quotation

Tout le monde se connaît, chacun a des soupçons, on ne parle plus que de ça ici... Quand je croise l'instigateur, il dit que c'est la vieille du bas bourg qui espionne tout de sa fenêtre, pour nos voisins ce serait justement l'instigateur qui a une photo de Pétain dans sa salle à manger; d'autres prétendent que c'est le père Viaque [...], ça devient infernal, chacun suspecte l'autre. (Chapter 10)

Resistance

Fighting against the Nazi occupation and the collaborationist Vichy regime were small cells of resistance. These groups of men and women (known as *maquisards* in rural areas) carried out **guerrilla warfare** activities on German and collaborationist targets, often involving sabotage of German supply lines and German supply centres. These cells of resistance had been set up immediately upon the signing of the armistice with Germany in 1940, following the appeal made from London by Charles de Gaulle on 18 June, in which he urged the French population to resist occupation.

guerrilla warfare *la guérilla* raids, ambushes and attacks, usually carried out by small groups of fighters

A TOUS LES FRANÇAIS

La France a perdu une bataille!

Mais la France n'a pas perdu la guerre!

Des gouvernements de traîtres ont, en collaboration avec les ennemis de l'étranger, trahi le peuple français. Ils ont voulu la déshonneur de la France. Mais, ils ne peuvent pas empêcher la France de continuer à résister. Ils ne peuvent pas empêcher la France de continuer à lutter. Ils ne peuvent pas empêcher la France de continuer à vaincre.

VIVE LA FRANCE!

GÉNÉRAL DE GAULLE

LE GÉNÉRAL DE GAULLE

This poster was written by Charles de Gaulle and distributed in London.

Charles de Gaulle was a member of the French government who objected to the armistice. Throughout the years of occupation, he led a government of France in exile, making regular broadcasts from London via the BBC, and was commander of the Free French Forces against the Axis powers. De Gaulle has been widely recognised as the undisputed leader of the French resistance movement.

Axis powers *Les pays de l'Axe*, the coalition headed by Germany, Italy and Japan that opposed the Allied powers in World War II

Nice and the Italian occupation zone

Since Nice lay outside the German occupied zone of France (at least until 1943), it became one of the destinations to which thousands fled to escape the Germans. Among those who arrived in Nice were Jews from all over Europe. It has been estimated that between 1940 and 1944 there were over 30,000 Jews living along 20 miles of the Riviera coast. In Nice, the Jews were relatively safe from anti-Semitic legislation because the city was in the zone which was occupied from June 1940 to September 1943 by the Italians. The Italian occupying forces, although allied with the Germans, refused to cooperate with the anti-Semitic round-ups of Jews which were organised by the collaborationist Vichy regime.

Unfortunately, once the Italians were replaced by the Germans in 1943, Alois Bruner of the SS arrived and set up units of the SS and the Gestapo, who had specific orders to seek out Jews. Within five months, over 5,000 Jews in the Nice area were captured and deported.

Key quotations

Le 10 septembre, un train s'arrêta en gare et un millier d'Allemands en descendirent. Il y avait des SS et des civils parmi eux, des hommes de la Gestapo. (Chapter 7)

... Il ressort qu'ils arrêtèrent tous les Juifs, qu'ils sont enfermés à l'hôtel Excelsior et tous les vendredis ils sont emmenés la nuit dans des convois spéciaux vers les camps allemands. Ce sont des wagons scellés qui sont prioritaires. Ils passent même avant les trains de troupes et les convois d'armes. (Chapter 8)

German surrender and the liberation of Paris, 1944

Not much more than a month after the Normandy landings and the final Allied offensive against the Germans in July 1944, the Germans surrendered the French capital on 25 August and Paris was finally liberated. Charles de Gaulle entered the city at the head of the army and assumed control as provisional head of the French Republic.

Key quotations

Ce fut aussi simple que cela, d'une simplicité telle que j'en fus presque déçu. Je m'attendais à plus de spectacle, plus de vacarme. Je croyais que les guerres et les poursuites finissaient en opérâ avec des gestes, des ports de bras, des poses splendides, eh bien pas du tout. (Chapter 11)

Et tout à coup, sur tous mes canards, des lettres énormes, sur toute une page, des lettres comme je n'aurais pas cru qu'il en existe dans les imprimeries.

PARIS LIBÉRÉ. (Chapter 11)

Reprisals

After the liberation of Paris, many Nazi collaborators were pursued, in the desire to see those responsible for war crimes against humanity face justice and be categorised as criminals. Spontaneous retaliation occurred in numerous communities throughout France. Women suspected of having romances with the enemy or of being prostitutes for the Germans had their heads shaved and were paraded in public, accused of *la collaboration horizontale*. Black marketeers were branded as war profiteers (*profiteurs de la guerre*). This was a time of *l'épuration sauvage* (purging with rough justice).

This would be followed by a period of *l'épuration légale* (legalised purging) which, between 1944 and 1951, would see over 6,000 people prosecuted for treason and other war offences. Maréchal Pétain was tried and convicted for treason and sentenced to death, although his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He died in 1951.

Key quotation

C'était l'heure des comptes qui était venue, l'après-midi. Il y avait trois filles qui étaient passées dans la rue [...], elles avaient le crâne rasé et des croix gammées peintes sur le visage, on disait aussi qu'un des fils d'une voisine avait été fusillé dans le bois, il avait été retrouvé au moment où il essayait de cacher son uniforme de milicien. (Chapter 11)

The Holocaust, 1941-1945

The Holocaust (*l'Holocauste*), also known as the Shoah (*la Shoah*), is the term used to denote the genocide of the 6 million Jews who were murdered as a result of Adolf Hitler's Nazi policies. Under the coordination of the SS, Hitler's *Endlösung* ('Final Solution' or *Solution Finale*) was to attempt to eradicate the Jews completely. The figure of 6 million includes 1.5 million children.

ACTIVITÉ 5

Faites des recherches supplémentaires pour créer une présentation visuelle ('PowerPoint') sur la Shoah. Dans la présentation donnez des exemples de cette politique antisémite tirés d'un sac de billes. Vous pouvez aussi si vous voulez ajouter des images et des extraits sonores appropriés.

Upgrade

Writing about context

In an examination answer you are not expected to write a detailed history essay outlining the context of Joffo's novel. It is helpful, however, to relate relevant events which support your answer to their historical counterparts, which reinforce the 'truth and 'authenticity' of Joffo's novel. Although this narrative is closely based on events which actually occurred, Joffo blurs reality with fiction in his presentation of these events. We cannot escape the historical backdrop against which Jo's experiences as a child are related to the reader, but we can never be certain how much has been adapted for dramatic effect. The information presented in the Context section of this literature guide is there to help you understand the references Joffo makes throughout his account of Jo and Maurice's adventures. Use this information only where it is appropriate, to back up the points you are making about the novel. In terms of examination answers, the **authoritative source** is the novel itself.

authoritative source la source qui fait autorité: the source which is recognised as being most truthful and reliable

Vocabulary

arrêter to arrest	oublier to forget
l'affiche (f) poster	la rafle raid, round-up
ajouter to add	la réalité reality
le bombardement bombing	renforcer to reinforce
le bouc émissaire scapegoat	la résistance resistance
combiner to combine	la Shoah Shoah, the Jewish name for the Holocaust
la croix gammée swastika	le soupçon suspicion
l'élément (m) element	souçonner to suspect
espionner to spy on	valider to validate
l'étoile (f) jaune yellow star	la zone libre unoccupied zone, free zone
le génocide genocide	la zone occupée occupied zone
l'Holocauste (m) the Holocaust	
la législation antisémite anti-Semitic legislation	

Useful phrases

- Pour mieux apprécier le roman... In order to appreciate the novel better ...
- En captant la réalité de la situation... By capturing the reality of the situation ...
- En faisant référence aux événements réels... By making reference to real events ...
- Une impression de vraisemblance est créée en... A sense of realism is created by ...
- Joffo combine la réalité et la fiction afin de... Joffo combines reality with fiction in order to ...
- Les références aux faits historiques renforcent... The references to historical facts reinforce ...
- Vu(e) dans le contexte de... Seen in the context of ...
- Il faut considérer le contexte de... We must consider the context of ...
- Le contexte historique nous apprend que... The historical context tells us that ...
- En tant que roman autobiographique... As an autobiographical novel ...
- Le récit de Joffo se déroule... Joffo's story takes place ...
- Joffo fait référence à... Joffo refers to ...