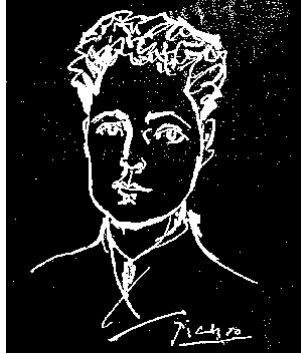


# Free Henri Martin!

By Alain Ruscio, *Humanité* August 2, 2003.



Henri Martin, by Picasso

It happens still, from time to time. A sharp-eyed pedestrian, strolling at random through the streets of some town, will discover an old slogan painted on a wall: “Free Henri Martin!” Those who are not so young anymore no doubt still have this name tucked into a corner of their memory. Others, if they are curious types, will reach for their pocket dictionary, and ask themselves: Why the devil did they imprison this amiable 19<sup>th</sup> century historian, a member of the French Academy to boot?

But no, it is about our own century. Henri Martin, thank God, is still alive, still solid as an oak. He is no historian, but at one time he made history. For many, his name still evokes a little-known war – the war waged by France in Indochina between 1945 and 1954.

The Henri Martin Affair! The imprisonment of Henri Martin! There was a time when France spoke of nothing else. It will be a half-century, this August 2, since Henri Martin was set free after three years of prison.

In 1945, when France itself had scarcely been liberated, Henri Martin, a young communist since the age of 16, a *maquisard* (Resistance fighter) since he was 17, joined the Navy. Sent to Indochina, he was sure he would face the Japanese army. But once on the spot he discovered a very different reality: the Japanese had already been disarmed, and the fighting was against native *maquisards*, Vietnamese – though they were not called that at the time. Henri Martin was at Cochinchina [Central Vietnam, capital at Hué] when the colonial reconquest began. Above all, he was an eye-witness in November 1946 of the pitiless French bombardment of Haiphong, which made the conflict general. That made up his mind: he wanted to resign from the Navy and bear witness to what he had seen.

Alas! The Navy refused his resignation. Back in France Henri Martin is assigned to the Toulon Arsenal. No problem! He is a citizen – in uniform, but still a citizen. The campaign against the war, which the French Communist Party, or PCF, has soon termed the “dirty war”, is in full force. Working with the federation of Var [one of the departments, or ‘counties’, of France], itself solidly controlled by André Marty [one of

the leaders of the PCF], Henri Martin begins intensive propaganda work right in the middle of the Arsenal: distribution of leaflets, painting slogans on walls, etc. What had to happen, happened: Henri was arrested by the military police in March 1950. What's more, on classic charges: undermining national morale, illegal political agitation in military buildings – the prosecution even wanted to charge him with sabotage. What a circus! During the trial the accusation [of sabotage] collapsed, and Henri was definitively cleared of this indignity even by the military jury. What remained was a purely political trial.

Because the case of Henri Martin is at the meeting-point of two contrary programs. The prosecution, obviously in close league with the government at that time when, during the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, the independence of the judiciary was more than limited, wanted above all to weaken the Communist Party. Henri Martin's membership in the communist movement, although non-public, was never doubted by the investigators: they wanted to implicate the Party itself. In contrast, after the difficulties of mobilizing people around the slogan of refusing to manufacture, transport, and load war materiel, the Party leadership had been wondering for some time how to find another angle of attack against the war. How to avoid the isolation of an activist vanguard? How to get the greatest number of people to join in the rejection of the "dirty war"? The struggle must crystallize around symbols. Already in February 1950 a young, militant communist woman, Raymonde Dien, had lain down in front of a train carrying munitions bound for Indochina. She was sentenced to a year in a prison farm. Other militants were then imprisoned in Roanne, Marseille, Paris – including the entire leadership of the Communist Youth organization – Charleville...

However, the Henri Martin Affair had everything to make it exceptional. For one thing, the disproportion between the act – a simple political act, though against military regulations – and his sentence, five years in prison, was striking. Above all, Henri Martin had a profile that helped the propaganda to spread. He had been a very young anti-Nazi underground fighter, and that counted for a lot in a France that had only recently come out of the Resistance. He came from the heart of France, and in him every family could see a son, a brother, a fiancé. The communists and their allies would use this sensitive cord in a remarkable way, as a springboard towards more global moral awakening.



Poster for Henri Martin rally

Then an intense campaign, exceptional in its variation and size, began throughout the whole country. “The Dreyfus Affair of the Fourth Republic,” as some claimed? In any case, a privileged moment.

All the communist militants, but also those from the mass organizations, as they were then called (the CGT, Popular Aid, UFF, Peace Movement), were mobilized. Journalists were active: Hélène Parmelin in *l'Humanité*, Madeleine Riffaud in *La Vie Ouvrière*, Jean Mérot in *Avant-Garde*, described the actions, small and great, of the campaign: petitions, delegations to elected officials on every level, the distribution of millions of leaflets, painted slogans in the most improbable places, work stoppages in the shops. Actions of a much less traditional kind took place. An “Henri Martin” bicycle race was organized in Seine-et-Oise (near Paris). Some municipalities with Communist governments proclaimed “Henri Martin” streets, songs were written and shouted at deafening volume in the factories. Above all, the actors of the CGT unions, among them Paul Préboist, José Valverde, Martin Trévières, Jacques Mignot, and Raymond Gerbal, performed in every French city a play by Claude Martin and Henri Delmas, *The Drama at Toulon*, which was at the same time a true spectacle and a permanent political rally. The communist intellectuals were “on the job.” Eluard dedicated one of his poems to Henri Martin, Picasso, Lurçat, Fernand Léger and Fougeron painted portraits of the young sailor. The campaign was international. At the World Festival in Berlin in 1951, French and Vietnamese youth, united, acclaimed the name of Henri Martin to delegates from all over the world. The great Vietnamese writer Nguyen Dinh Thi dedicated an emotional poem to him.



Nguyen Dinh Thi

During this period of the Cold War, synonymous with sharp political splits between the French Communist Party and almost all other political forces, the campaign for Henri Martin was nevertheless one of the rare moments in which the communists and those who usually worked with them broke through their isolation. Jean-Paul Sartre was the first to join the campaign for Henri’s freedom, and brought with him his team from *Les Temps Modernes*, but also Michel Leiris, Hervé Bazin, Vercors, Prévert. The editorial board of *L’Esprit* also joined the campaign. Thousands of socialist party militants, even those from the Gaullist party, and non-communist elected officials joined the campaign. It got to the point that the name of Henri Martin is often cited, with some annoyance, in the *Memoirs* of Vincent Auriol, then president of the Republic.

And the Vietnam war? It was everywhere, in the forefront. During the whole course of his long trial, Henri Martin himself spoke about nothing else. The opposition press, trying

to take advantage of the rapidly growing popularity of the prisoner, increasingly began to denounce the “dirty war,” led against the freedom of a people but also against the interests of the French nation, for the sole benefit of the American strategy of rolling back communism.

Finally, on August 2, 1953, early in the morning, without telling a single member of his family or a single one of his friends, Henri Martin was freed.

Three years in prison for world peace. Three years in prison for the freedom of a people.

A half-century later, as other wars rage on, as other regions are the victim of foreign aggression, it is good to remember that popular action can beat back wars and the governments that lead them.

(\*) Historian, specializing in the history of colonial Indochina.