The Summary in Brief

In David and Goliath, Malcolm Gladwell examines the principles that lead the underdog to overcome the giant, and succeed.

Reviewing a wide range of examples, drawn from the Civil Rights movement, the troubles in Northern Ireland and the Impressionists, Gladwell shows how underdogs, like David, can achieve success, and how this can occur.

Gladwell shows how advantages are not always what they seem, how adversity can create strength, and how a disagreeable nature can lead a person to question the conventional way of doing things – all of which can lead to a David-style victory. This book will challenge the way you think about power, advantage, and how you make decisions, helping you to think broadly and more constructively about how to solve difficult situations in the future.

In this summary you will learn

- Why advantages can sometimes be disadvantages, and disadvantages can sometimes be advantages.
- Why being a big fish in a small pond may be more advantageous than being a little fish in a big pond.
- Difficulty can be desirable because it can drive people to success they may otherwise not have achieved.
- Power needs to be legitimate. If authorities are going to overcome issues they have to act fairly, or they will lose legitimate power. Where legitimate power falls down, the underdog can win.

The Author: Malcolm Gladwell

Born in England and raised in rural Ontario, Malcolm Gladwell is these days a resident of New York. He has worked since 1996 as a staff writer at the New Yorker. Previously he served at the Washington Post. In 2005 he was named by Time as one of its top 100 most influential people, and he has honorary degrees from the University of Waterloo and the University of Toronto.

Since the turn of the millennium, Gladwell has combined his career at the New Yorker with becoming a bestselling author, roles he believes complement each other well. He has published five books to date: The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference, Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, Outliers: The Story of Success, What the Dog Saw: And Other Adventures, and David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants. The Tipping Point in particular is highly renowned and was ranked as among the best books of the decade. For more information about Malcolm Gladwell see: http://gladwell.com/

David and Goliath

Goliath

In ancient days, battles used to be fought repeatedly for a place of strategic importance that connects the Judean Mountains with the Mediterranean plain. In the Old Testament, the young Kingdom of Israel fought the Philistine armies from Crete for control of this area. The Philistines were fearsome opponents, and enemies of the Israelites. Saul and his men would have to confront them, but neither side wanted to make the first move. The Philistines sent Goliath into the valley to fight one on one with an Israelite and resolve the situation. This was typical in the ancient world, to avoid the loss of life that would come from a full battle.

At a height of at least six foot nine, Goliath was a giant, and he was equipped with full body armor, a bronze helmet and weapons such as javelin, spear and sword. Goliath challenged the Israelites to a duel with a man of their choosing. Whichever side lost would be slaves to the other side. No one volunteered to fight Goliath, but a shepherd boy from Bethlehem came forward. He claimed he was used to fighting off lions and bears that were more ferocious and he was not scared. Saul was concerned due to the boy's small stature, but let him go and fight. The boy was David.

David and Goliath examines the phenomenon of regular people confronting giants. Each section tells a different tale of
where people overcame powerful opponents to succeed. The focus is on exploring two main ideas:

1. A lot of what we see as valuable in the world emerges from these types of conflicts where one party facing overwhelming odds succeeds. This produces beauty and greatness.

2. We have false ideas about these conflicts. We perceive giants as strong and powerful when they may not be. The reality of being the underdog can transform people, leading to opportunities that may otherwise have seemed inconceivable.

**Expectations**
Goliath had expectations about the warrior that would come to face him. He expected hand to hand combat and was prepared for this with his armor and weapons. Goliath was initially insulted when David appeared with apparently only a shepherd’s staff to fight against Goliath’s fine weaponry. He scoffed at the boy with his sticks, asking if he, Goliath, was seen as a dog. David then hit Goliath on an exposed part of his forehead with a stone from his sling. When the big man fell to the ground stunned, David ran at him, took his sword and cut off Goliath’s head. The Philistines fled. No one expected David to win, but he did. As a result, the term “David and Goliath” has become enshrined in language as a “metaphor for improbable victory”.

**Inaccuracies**
This version of events is inaccurate. In the armies of ancient times there were three types of warriors. Calvary comprised one. Infantry was a second – men on foot wearing armor and carrying weapons like swords. The third were projectile warriors and would be known today as artillery. They would sling rocks or balls from a leather pouch, and the slingshot was a dangerous weapon if the warrior had skill. Infantry with big heavy armor were slow moving and were an easy target for slingers.

Goliath expected a duel with another infantryman and faced a slinger. David had speed and maneuverability on his side and fired a rock at Goliath so quickly that Goliath would not have been able to react to a battle that had transformed from what he was expecting. Since David was a slinger, no one watching would have thought his chances improbable.

**Assumptions about Power**
From reading the story we can see that Saul thought David had poor chances due to his small size, compared to Goliath. Saul saw power as physical might, yet the actual power came about from breaking the rules and using speed and surprise for strength. A second issue is Goliath’s strange behavior. He is supposedly a great warrior but does not act like one. For starters he has an attendant walk before him with a shield, which was atypical. Goliath also requests David go to him rather than going to meet David. Instead of being scared, he is insulted by David. This behavior has led medical experts to suggest Goliath had acromegaly. This is caused by a benign tumor, leads to considerable growth and causes double vision. It is probable that Goliath did not even see David until he was close. David was fast and powered by courage and faith, while Goliath was blind to his approach and slowed by armor.

The story we all know is not really how it was portrayed. This book is about better understanding these types of stories.

**Part One: The Advantages of Disadvantages (and the Disadvantages of Advantages)**

**Vivek Ranadive**

**Unconventional strategies**
When Vivek Ranadivé began coaching his 12-year-old daughter’s basketball team he had never played basketball. He was confused that Team A would score and then go back to its own end of the court. Team B would then dribble the ball to Team A’s end where Team A was waiting and Team B would score. This pattern would repeat. Teams rarely contested the advance. This was not favorable for weak teams. It allowed good teams to win.

Ranadivé’s team only had two girls that could shoot. He knew his team was weak but decided on a strategy that his team would play the full court every game, and the team got to the national championships. He took an unconventional strategy of trapping dribblers, stealing the ball or making them run out of time, so that the opponents never got the ball on inbound plays. This hid the fact that they did not have good shooters. The strategy meant the girls had to be fitter to be all over the court. Ranadivé focused on attitude and fitness over shooting hoops, expecting players to try harder than everyone else.

The underdog winning is more common than people think. Most people think if a country ten times larger in population faces a smaller country in battle then the larger country will win, 100% of the time. The reality is that just under a third of the time the weaker country wins. When the weaker country does not play by the “rules” they win 63.6% of the time.

**Advantages of disadvantages**
Underdogs may have a lack of resources, but sometimes this can be an advantage. We have a fixed idea of what an advantage is. However, an advantage may be thinking
unconventionally about how to win. In Ranadivé’s case the fact that his team could not shoot, dribble and pass was a great disadvantage, but this made their winning strategy possible. The strategy led to calls that it was “unfair”. It was not. It was simply an aggressive defensive strategy. We often think that prestige and resources make people better off, but these can limit people’s options. Underdogs have the advantage of freedom to try out new ideas.

Teresa DeBrito

The Fallacy of Advantages
The Shepaug Middle Valley School was once booming. Then the area was discovered by wealthy couples from New York and the price of real estate went up. Young families could not afford to live there. Enrollment at the school dropped, and class sizes have become small. The school is now intimate rather than crowded. Most people would want their children in small class sizes. Most countries are working to lower class sizes. Seventy-seven percent of Americans think that lowering class sizes makes more sense than raising teacher salaries. The general understanding is that children get more attention from teachers at Shepaug and other such schools.

This can be tested at Shepaug, since between 2001 and 2002 the number of students in fifth grade dropped from 23 to 10, and nothing else in the school or locally changed. This sets up perfect conditions for a natural experiment. No difference was found in pupil results. This type of test has been repeated worldwide, and small class sizes have been found to only do better than large class sizes in 15% of cases. In 15% of cases children in large class sizes do better. Only in Greece and Iceland have reduced class sizes been found to make an actual difference. Policy remains focused on hiring more teachers for smaller class sizes. Yet what we think is a great advantage may actually not be at all.

The inverted U-curve
Children can do well overcoming adversity and learning things the hard way – learning to make their own way in the world. When those successful children become parents it is much harder for them to teach their children how to learn the hard way due to the privilege of money. People can be ruined by having to do everything the hard way, but they can also be ruined by having it too easy. Parenting may become easier as income improves, but after a point when the income gets high enough then parenting gets harder again. For example, having a conversation about what children cannot have is easier if there is no money.

This helps understand the issue at Shepaug and other small class sizes. Graphically it presents itself as an inverted U-curve. Parenting becomes easier for a while as wealth increases but beyond a point of wealth, it gets harder again. The same is true of class sizes. Large class sizes may lead to poor performance. There may be an optimal level at which smaller classes attain better results, if class sizes get too small, poor results are attained.

The Goliath trap — being bigger, stronger and richer is not always an advantage
Teresa DeBrito was the principle at Shepaug for 5 years and dreaded very small class sizes. Smaller classes only lead to a better outcome if teachers adapt teaching style when they have a lower workload, and teachers do not do that. Most teachers agree that 18 is an optimal class size – children do not feel too vulnerable but have a chance to feel important. Yet 12 is too small – there is not enough diversity and nowhere to hide. A critical mass is needed for debate, and there are fewer children to learn from. DeBrito wanted debate and diversity as it was more exciting and engaging. Private schools that offer no more than 12 students per class fall into a Goliath trap. Money cannot buy you all the advantages.

Being bigger, stronger and richer is not always in a person’s best interests for success.

Caroline Sacks

The struggles of the Impressionists
In the nineteenth century, the Impressionists faced a difficult choice. Their form of art was new and unconventional. This was not appreciated in Paris. Big names like Manet, Degas, Renoir, Cézanne and Monet were all struggling with their new art movement. The problem was the Salon. This was the most important place for an artist to have their work featured. Everyone wanted to be exhibited there because people did not want to buy paintings from artists that were not featured there. The Salon jury did not appreciate Impressionist art so their paintings would not get featured. To succeed they had to choose to be big fish in a little pond breaking away from being little fish in the big pond of the Salon.

Making optimal decisions
We frequently face this type of dilemma. For example, we place great importance on getting into the best institutions, educationally. Yet this may not be in our best interests.

Caroline Sacks excelled at her public schools in Washington DC. She enjoyed writing and drawing as a child, but she loved science. She got As in every class she took. When choosing a school, she decided on Brown with the University of Maryland as her back up. She chose Brown over the University of Maryland because it has better rankings, more resources, greater prestige and accomplished faculty. Based on the
Impressionists, we can question whether she made the best choice. The choice was not so much between a good option and a worse option – rather the choice was between two different options.

The Impressionists chose to make their own exhibit, and found their self-created small pond to be a place where they were big fish and welcomed. Innovation and individuality was too. Their decision led to greater creative freedom, and ultimately the world taking notice. Caroline Sacks’ decision was similar. She could be a big fish at the University of Maryland or a little fish at Brown. She chose the Salon of Brown and paid a high price. Sacks found that she was getting lower grades than she wanted. She was not excelling for the first time in her life. She felt inadequate. She could not keep up in Chemistry, which she had loved. She was a little fish in a big, very competitive pond.

**Relative deprivation**

Caroline Sacks was suffering from “relative deprivation”. People form their impressions locally based on context rather than globally. This means how deprived we are is relative. This is well known to happen in education – the better the school is; the worse students feel about their abilities. This impacts on self-concept, motivation and confidence. It leads to students dropping out, even though they are doing really well.

The advantages of Brown are similar to the Salon – the prestige and the connections are well known big pond advantages. However, the risks are higher of dropping out. Studies have shown that the smarter your peers are the dumber you feel and are more likely to drop out. By choosing Brown, Sacks reduced her chances of graduating with a science degree to 30%. She ended up taking an arts degree instead.

Other studies have shown that in hiring, the best students from mediocre schools are almost always a better bet than good students from the best schools. Elite schools are good for those at the top and difficult for everyone else. Despite this, affirmative action lets students that are less able into elite schools because it is thought that this helps them – it does not.

**Part 2: The Theory of Desirable Difficulty**

**David Boies**

**Desirable difficulties**

Dyslexia is a challenging disorder, making it difficult for those with it to read effectively. Many children do not get diagnosed until they are 8 or 9 years old, by which time they have been adversely affected psychologically. They are thought of as stupid because they cannot read or comprehend as quickly as others, due to the way their brains are formed. Ultimately they are more likely to end up in the juvenile system.

Conventional thinking tells us that a disadvantage is a bad thing that will set a person back. Yet there is another way of looking at this, in terms of “desirable difficulties” – a term coined by Robert and Elizabeth Bjork at the University of California. This helps to understand how some underdogs excel. A study of IQ tests found that making the test harder led to students getting better marks. For example, a change to the font making the test hard to read led to students getting better marks. *Making people think harder created a desirable hurdle.*

Not all hurdles or difficulties are desirable, as in the case of Caroline Parks. Most people would not say that having dyslexia would be desirable. Yet studies show that a disproportionate number of successful entrepreneurs are dyslexic. This may be because they triumphed in spite of their disability because they are so creative that nothing would stop them. *More likely however, they succeeded precisely because of their disorder.*

**Finding strategies to succeed**

David Boies was from a farming community. He struggled to learn to read and did not realize he had dyslexia until later. In his community this was not a problem as reading was not essential – most of his peers quit school early to work on the farm. He did not do well at school and began menial work on the farm. He did not do well at school and began menial work on leaving. Once he had his first child his wife wanted more from him. He went to study law and now is one of the greatest trial lawyers in the world.

This is puzzling, but Boies succeeded by finding strategies to help him to do so. He avoided the core courses with heavy reading. Law school meant more reading but he quickly learned that case summaries meant only reading one page. He used his good listening skills. His memory was very sharp as he’d had to use it all his life to a much greater extent than everyone else thanks to the dyslexia. On graduating he chose to do litigation because it requires less reading. He memorizes what he has to say. Learning by listening and asking questions allows him to simplify issues which is helpful in court.

Boies developed these skills precisely because he has dyslexia and had to find ways to overcome this. For him, dyslexia was a desirable difficulty. *Desirable difficulties lead to “compensation learning” like this, which is hard, but can lead to greater results.*
Impact on personality – the advantage of disagreeableness

Dyslexics are outsiders, similarly to Impressionists. On the Big Five inventory of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness and agreeableness, innovators and revolutionaries tend to have a specific level of these features, especially openness, conscientiousness and agreeableness. They are open to new ideas, they are hard-working and they have to be disagreeable to the extent that they will take social risks and do things others may not approve of. This is not easy. Dyslexia does not make people more open or conscientious but it can allow them to be disagreeable.

Emil “Jay” Freireich

Remote misses

Jay Freireich grew up in challenging circumstances. His parents were Hungarian immigrants and his father died suddenly, leaving his mother to bring up two children. Making ends meet was hard. Out at work all of the time, she hired an Irish lady to look after her children for room and board. When she remarried she fired the Irish lady that Jay refers to as his mother. This was very traumatic for Jay.

In the Second World War and in the years leading up to it, the UK government was worried that London was a major target. London was seen as helpless against this, and it was thought that everything would fall to pieces. People would face massive psychiatric problems. In 1940 the attack began and people did not react in the expected way. They showed courage but also indifference. This, despite the fact that more than a million lost their homes over the war.

This led to the theory that there are three types of people when a bomb falls – those that die, those that are near misses and survive deeply impressed with fear and shock, and those that are remote misses. The latter see and hear what is going on but the bomb is always in the next street. A remote miss leads to a feeling of excitement and invulnerability. London was not fazed by remote misses. Instead, it led to great morale. This theory of morale is similar to that of desirable difficulty. Some people may be profoundly damaged by bombing, while others were better off as a result of the experience. There is not always just one response to a terrible, traumatic situation.

Losing a parent and handling adversity

Freireich wanted to go to medical school and his mother managed to secure him the $25 needed to do so. He waited tables to pay tuition and fed himself with leftovers. Freireich was atypical – he was not privileged or from the upper middle class. He became a brilliant physician, but he never stepped far away from his roots, and could be found shouting down the phone or saying whatever came into his mind, upsetting many. He was fired seven times. Most people do not behave like this because we think about how others might feel to be on the receiving end of it.

A study by Marvin Eisenstadt in the early 1960s found that many creatives had lost a parent in childhood. This turned out to be a pattern in a wider study, and found among politicians as well. Difficult childhoods and parental loss come up repeatedly – and geniuses have a high rate of growing up in adverse conditions.

When faced with the child leukemia ward where children were dying all the time, most doctors could not handle it. Freireich did not get depressed and he worked with a researcher to find a solution. He came up with an approach based on blood transfusions, which was focused on the idea that the children were losing platelets from bleeding all the time. This worked and children stopped bleeding. Children could now be kept alive long enough to start understanding the underlying cause of their problem. Freireich was not afraid to try to work on dying children to give them a chance. He came up with a drug cocktail to help, putting some of the children into remission. This was unheard of in the early 1960s, and the drugs were toxic. He continued despite being seen as crazy. His colleague Frei did not understand how Freireich handled the situation, but Freireich had already been through the worst in losing his mother. We still use Freireich’s cancer strategies today.

Courage is earned when the tough times start, and when a person realizes that it is not so tough after all. Freireich should not be glad for the childhood he had, but society does need people who have emerged from trauma, who are hardened and who can do the unthinkable.

Wyatt Walker

The use of tricks in battling giants

One of the most famous photographs of the American civil rights movement was taken in Birmingham, Alabama and showed a teenage boy being attacked by a police dog. The picture was published in almost every major newspaper. While the civil rights movement had been running for years, this photograph seemed to turn the tide.

When Martin Luther King arrived in Birmingham, movement had not achieved much for a decade and the south was very divided. Chaos prevailed. Martin Luther King was the underdog in Birmingham, leading a community that had always been the underdog, but this community had learned about battling giants.
Trickster animals that prevail against overwhelming odds are part of the folk law of many cultures. One example is the story of how the fox was defeated by Brer Rabbit, by trapping it in tar. For African Americans who were long persecuted, the lessons of trickster animals that use their wits to survive and overcome seem particularly relevant. The trickster can break the rules because they have nothing to lose. This provides them unexpected freedom.

**An unconventional approach**
Wyatt Walker worked with King. Both men knew they could not fight racism the conventional way. They needed to tip the hand of the authorities by revealing their ugly side. The police dog photograph did exactly that. Walker was a practical man, and a trickster. Walker managed to activate children to attend and view the civil rights protest, and the authorities became desperate. They tried getting rid of the child observers, thinking they were protestors. They used water hoses, but Walker kept sending more children and the fire trucks ran out. That was when the dog was allowed to lunge at the boy.

Walker and King had to pretend to the authorities they had hundreds of times more supporters than they did. To the press, they had to pretend to be shocked. Yet at the same time they were delighted. This might seem shocking, but they had no choice. They had to use what they had, and the fight was not fair. They had to trick their way to success. The photograph itself is not what it seemed. It does not show a passive boy being bitten by a police dog. The boy was leaning in to deliver a sharp blow to the dog. He had grown up around dogs and was not afraid. The boy was not even a protestor – he was a spectator who had come to watch the events unfolding. The photograph was trickery.

For African Americans who were long persecuted, the lessons of trickster animals that use their wits to survive and overcome seem particularly relevant. The trickster can break the rules because they have nothing to lose. This provides them unexpected freedom.

**An unconventional approach**
Wyatt Walker worked with King. Both men knew they could not fight racism the conventional way. They needed to tip the hand of the authorities by revealing their ugly side. The police dog photograph did exactly that. Walker was a practical man, and a trickster. Walker managed to activate children to attend and view the civil rights protest, and the authorities became desperate. They tried getting rid of the child observers, thinking they were protestors. They used water hoses, but Walker kept sending more children and the fire trucks ran out. That was when the dog was allowed to lunge at the boy.

Walker and King had to pretend to the authorities they had hundreds of times more supporters than they did. To the press, they had to pretend to be shocked. Yet at the same time they were delighted. This might seem shocking, but they had no choice. They had to use what they had, and the fight was not fair. They had to trick their way to success. The photograph itself is not what it seemed. It does not show a passive boy being bitten by a police dog. The boy was leaning in to deliver a sharp blow to the dog. He had grown up around dogs and was not afraid. The boy was not even a protestor – he was a spectator who had come to watch the events unfolding. The photograph was trickery.

**Part Three: The Limits of Power**

**Rosemary Lawlor**

**Handling insurgencies**

Rosemary Lawlor was a newlywed when the troubles began in Northern Ireland. The Lawlors were Catholic, and Catholics were a minority in Northern Ireland. They had to return to the Ballymurphy Catholic neighborhood and settle there. Things got worse and there was a riot in Ballymurphy. The army patrolled the streets. Catholics fired on Protestants and Protestants retaliated with setting fires. The Ballymurphy neighborhood was put on curfew.

In the same year, two economists, Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Junor came up with a theory of handling insurgencies, bringing the problem down to mathematics.

The theory went that rioters riot because the costs of rioting are not high enough. The theory also said that authorities also had to be unconcerned with how lawbreakers felt about their strategies.

Ian Freeland was brought into Northern Ireland, a general in charge of the armed forces. He knew what needed to be done and would take the necessary action. He had limited patience and was not afraid to use force. Freeland thought his men would be out of there in a matter of months, but instead it turned into a 30-year conflict. The basic mistake made was that resources, weapons, soldiers and experience that dwarfed the opponents would be enough, and that it did not matter what the people of Northern Ireland thought. Leites and Wolf were wrong: it did matter. People behave as a consequence of the way they are treated.

**The principle of legitimacy**

This occurs due to the principle of legitimacy, of which there are 3 parts. One is that people being asked to obey have to have a voice – if they speak up they will be listened to. Second, the law has to be predictable and reasonable. Third, the authority has to be fair – one group may not be treated differently than another. Respect has to be earned.

In Northern Ireland in July it is marching season by the Protestants. Marching season frequently ends in violence. The law and order in Northern Ireland did not seem fair to the Catholics. This was reinforced by the fact that soldiers stood with their backs to the Loyalists as if to protect them from the Catholics, but not the other way around. Freeland did not win legitimate power in Northern Ireland. It took a long time for the British to understand this. More crackdowns led to more problems and violence. The law was not fair or predictable.

Lawlor’s younger brother was being harassed by the army and was eventually shot. This destroyed her parents. This tipped her over the edge. Other women in the neighborhood had also been pushed too far. There was no bread for anyone to eat. The women, including Lawlor gathered in groups with their prams to march and go and get bread. The soldiers did not know what to do. They handled it with brutality, beating up women, but women kept coming. The British lost control and the curfew was broken.

**Wilma Derksen**

**Three strikes and the inverted U-curve**

On a weekend home from college, the daughter of Mike Reynolds, Kimber, was shot by two young men who were crystal meth addicts. Mike vowed that he would do what he could to prevent this ever happening to anyone again. He
roused support in the community and called a meeting with everyone he could think of to work out what could be done about it.

The conclusion was that the penalties for breaking the law were too low, and chronic offenders were treated the same as first-time offenders. The meeting came up with the Three Strikes Law. A third offense would lead to a mandatory 25-year sentence. Three Strikes got signed into law. The crime rate initially came down. Yet Reynolds did not get what he wanted, even though the power initially seemed to achieve its purpose.

However, it became apparent that the relationship between crime and punishment is an inverted U curve. Past a certain point cracking down on crime would have no effect. The benefits of doing crime were still greater than the risks, despite the Three Strikes. Criminals do not think that far ahead and do not have a stake in society. Putting people in prison places them in contact with other criminals. It separates them from providing support to their families and children. This increases the chance of crime. If society locks up too many people for too long the benefits start to be outweighed by the damage.

Forgiveness — an alternative approach

In Canada, Wilma Derksen got a call from her daughter who needed collecting from school. The logistics were difficult and she asked her daughter to take the bus. Her daughter did not show up. The police came and a search committee was formed. The body was found seven weeks later, tied up in a shed and frozen to death. The tragedy had a similar effect as in the Reynolds case in the local community. People came to their house, including a man whose daughter had also been murdered. He explained the bad that had come to his life through his desire to get justice. Instead of pursuing justice in an all-consuming way, Wilma and her husband moved on. They did this despite 20 years later finding out who murdered their child and watching the trial. She believes this saved her marriage, friendships and sanity.

The Derksens believed in a philosophy of forgiving and moving on, since there are limits to what the law can accomplish. Mike Reynolds on the other hand, believed in justice. However, there comes a point where this backfires, as the British learned in Northern Ireland. Those that think they have the greatest advantage through power need to realize that this has great constraints. The world is upside down when a man tries to change the world with power and fails, yet another saves her world with forgiveness.

André Trocmé

Non-compliance

French Jews were at risk once the German army beat France. In Vichy, Marshal Philippe Pétain was allowed to rule, given powers by the Germans. He stripped the Jews of their power, interning them. He demanded that everyone do the fascist salute to the French flag. Most complied, but the people of Le Chambon sur Lignon would not. The local pastor in Le Chambon was André Trocmé, a pacifist. He preached loving, forgiving and doing good without giving up and without cowardice, resisting where possible. One example of this resistance was with the salute. Other demands such as putting up Pétain’s picture in schools were also not met.

Jewish people were arriving in Le Chambon. The Quakers, who could get children out of concentration camps, needed somewhere to send them. Trocmé offered Le Chambon. George Lamirand, the Vichy minister of youth affairs took a visit to Le Chambon. He did not receive a warm welcome. He was presented with a letter, saying, “We have Jews. You’re not getting them.”

The Nazis did not make an example of Le Chambon. The best explanation is that wiping out an entire town would not have been simple. The people were not afraid and had faced similar threats for centuries. They had learned how to survive persecution. They drew up false papers for the Jews and smuggled them to Switzerland. The resources of these people was tremendous and it would have been hard for the Nazis to overcome. Even when André Trocmé and his colleague were interned they did not give up. Eventually they were sent home. André Trocmé was disagreeable. Killing such a man would not work, and would have similar results to Northern Ireland, since excessive force creates legitimacy issues. (By the way, Trocmé’s mother also died when he was young).