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Thomas J. Laub, *After the Fall: German Policy in Occupied France, 1940-1944*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. xiv +330 pp. Maps, figures, tables, bibliography, and index. \$110 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-953932-1.

Review by Talbot Imlay, Université Laval.

A lively scholarly debate has developed on the nature of the German occupation regime in France during World War II and, in particular, on the role of the German military authorities, often referred to by the umbrella term *Militärbefehlshaber in Frankreich*. (MbF) In the older view, represented by Eberhard Jäckel and Hans Umbreit, the MbF, faced with mounting resistance activity, reacted with moderation and in general conformity with the international laws and norms of the time. Excesses against the civilian population did occur, but they differed fundamentally in scope and intent from German occupation practices in South-eastern and Eastern Europe. Excesses, in any case, were predominately the work of the more ideologically-driven police and security forces, the SS and SD, and not of the MbF.[1]

More recently, however, Ulrich Meyer and Regina Delacor among others have vigorously challenged this view, arguing that the MbF not only participated far more actively in mass violence than was claimed, but also—and more controversially—that its efforts to repress the French resistance quickly transmuted into an ideological war against Nazi Germany's enemies, principally Jews and communists combined under the rubric of the Judeo-Bolshevist menace. Indeed, Meyer and Delacor maintain that the military authorities contributed decisively to unleashing the "Final Solution" in France when, in December 1941, General Otto von Stülpnagel, the actual MbF, proposed to deport large numbers of Jews and communists in response to resistance attacks on individual Germans. Far from being opposed to Hitler's racial war of annihilation, the MbF appears to have waged a Nazi "*Weltanschauungskrieg*" of its own.[2]

This debate provides the historiographical context for *After the Fall*, Thomas Laub's stimulating study of German policy in occupied France. Using German archival records in Germany, France and the United States, Laub attempts to trace a middle course between Meyer and Delacor on the one hand and the older historiography on the other. In doing so, his book complements Gaël Eismann's study which also appeared in 2010.[3] However unlike Eismann, who focuses on German security policy, Laub casts his gaze somewhat wider, discussing for example German efforts to recruit and conscript French labour. Laub's principal argument is that the MbF never enjoyed uncontested authority in France. From the beginning, it faced multiple competitors such as Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi party's ideological expert, whose roving bands of officials sought to identify and seize various cultural treasures in France; Hermann Göring, the Economics Minister and head of the Four-Year Plan, who strove to bring the French economy fully under his authority; Joseph Goebbels, the Propaganda Minister, who believed he had a right to meddle in the occupation; the German embassy in Paris whose ambitious chief, Otto Abetz, pursued a parallel policy of collaboration with Vichy authorities; the SS and SD whose influence on security matters grew by leaps and bounds from 1942; the Armed Forces High Command (OKW) whose sycophantic head, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel,

refused to stand up to Hitler on the MbF's behalf; Hitler himself whose sporadic interest in France usually translated into pressure for harsher measures against civilians; and the Vichy government and authorities who increasingly insisted on concrete concessions in return for their cooperation.

Faced with this swirl of overlapping and competing power centres, the MbF had little choice but to accommodate the interests and demands of its many rivals. Going further, Laub applies the concept of accommodation, which he borrows from Philippe Burrin, to policy-making under the German occupation in general, averring that it helps to explain the relative success or failure of German policies. In areas where mutual accommodation produced cooperation, such as labour policy, the results were striking (850,000 French workers sent to Germany), whereas in areas where it did not, such as the "Final Solution," the results were disappointing (only 75-80,000 Jews deported).

Following two introductory chapters which discuss France's defeat in 1940 and the various German authorities in France, Laub develops his argument over eight concise chapters. Chapter three, which is devoted to the efforts of Rosenberg's officials to confiscate Jewish property, explains how the latter became a wedge that the SS and SD used to infiltrate themselves into France against the wishes--and to the ultimate detriment--of the MbF. The next four chapters examine the fraught issue of the MbF's role in repressive measures against the resistance, and it is here that Laub most clearly stakes out a middle position between the two historiographical poles outlined above. From the beginning, the MbF sought to limit reprisals for attacks on Germans, maintaining that the large-scale and indiscriminate execution of hostages was counter-productive. However, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, increasing resistance attacks on Germans together with mounting pressure from Hitler and the OKW forced the MbF to adopt harsher measures, even if Stülpnagel continued to reject what he termed "Polish methods" in France (p. 139). At the same time, Laub agrees that in late-1941 to early 1942 the MbF embraced a policy of deporting large numbers of Jews and communists, thereby transforming security policy into an instrument of the Nazi regime's larger racial-ideological aims. But Laub distances himself from Meyer and Delacor in stating that the MbF -- and Stülpnagel in particular-- were motivated more by tactical considerations than by ideological affinities with the Nazis. Not only were deportations of Jews and communists unlikely to alienate Vichy and the French public, but much of the task itself could be dumped into the eager and outstretched arms of the SS and SD, allowing the MbF to keep its hands relatively clean.

Chapters eight and nine concentrate on the "Final Solution" in France. Laub begins by emphasizing that Otto von Stülpnagel and his successor and cousin, Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, both authorized mass deportation, before going on to explain that the MbF took a back seat to the SS/SD and Vichy authorities in the arrest, confinement and deportation of Jews. This reserve stemmed partly from a lack of enthusiasm for the SS and SD's brand of anti-Semitism and even more from the belief that anti-Jewish measures would undermine economic collaboration with the French. The following chapter considers the link between Germany's labour policy and growing partisan (Maquis) resistance during 1942-44. Regarding the conscription of French labour, Laub traces negotiations between Fritz Sauckel and Vichy authorities (omitting any reference, however, to Bernd Zielinski's important study on the subject^[4]), concluding that the MbF played a passive role in the execution of decisions, leaving matters largely to the German and French police. Regarding German campaigns against the Maquis, whose members included many *réfractaires* from Vichy's labour laws, Laub generally follows the German historian Peter Lieb in arguing that the atrocities against civilians in 1943 and during the military retreat in 1944 were most often committed by the Waffen SS, the SS/SD and the French milice.^[5] Despite OKW orders in March 1944 to execute all partisans,

however defined, most German army units operated in France with a restraint that was notably absent in South-eastern and Eastern Europe. The focus of Laub's final chapter are the events in July 1944 surrounding the attempt on Hitler's life, which in Paris resulted in an odd complicity between the military officers and the SS/SD in covering up the extent of the MbF's implication in the conspiracy.

Overall, there is much to praise in Laub's study. His extended treatment of the occupiers is a welcome addition to the Anglo-French historiography on Vichy France, much of which presents the latter principally in Franco-French terms. No less valuable is his effort to establish a middle position on the question of the MbF and its role in Nazi Germany's racial war. Throughout the study, Laub carefully assesses the MbF's policies and actions against the evidence, concluding that while it was certainly complicit in the regime's worst crimes, important distinctions need to be made between and among the various institutions and organizations involved in the occupation. Together with Eismann and Lieb's work, Laub's book will likely come to represent the new orthodoxy.

For all its strengths, however, Laub's study is not without its problems. Probably the biggest one concerns accommodation as an explanatory tool. Burrin coined the concept to capture the reaction of the French, the vast majority of whom were neither committed resisters nor collaborators, to the realities of occupation – an occupation that they had not asked for but nevertheless had to live with. But how useful is Burrin's concept for describing the MbF's situation? Although he never explicitly says so, Laub seems to suggest that the relationship of the French people to the German occupation can be likened to that of the MbF to the Nazi regime. If so, the comparison is certainly odd; more importantly, it offers little help in answering the thorny question lying at the heart of disputes about the MbF's role in France: to what extent did German officers and soldiers willingly embrace Nazi Germany's racial-ideological war? If, as is possible, Laub had no intention of making this comparison, then the concept of accommodation risks being reduced to the argument that German occupation policies were the result of negotiations between and among various German and French authorities. While no one is likely to contest this argument, it does nevertheless leave open the question of what precisely was the MbF's relationship to the Nazi regime.

Finally, another possible problem is Laub's neglect of the economic side of the occupation. To be sure, *After the Fall* reflects current historiographical trends in which the focus is on the maintenance of internal security, the repression of the resistance and the application of the "Final Solution"—and the links between the three. But historiographical relevance can carry a price. As Laub himself admits, throughout the occupation the MbF's priority was on the economic exploitation of France. Indeed, as Germany's overall military situation worsened from 1942 onwards, harnessing French resources to the German war effort became increasingly urgent, creating a common denominator among the various German authorities in France that arguably did not exist on security issues. Equally to the point, the MbF played a prominent role in the efforts to exploit France, for example through the numerous armament teams (*Rüstungskommandos*) stationed across the country and staffed by military personnel. More on the economic activities of the occupation would have been welcome, if only to help us better to understand how the MbF conceived of its role and responsibilities in France.

NOTES

[1] Eberhard Jäckel, *Frankreich in Hitlers Europa. Die deutsche Frankreichpolitik im 2. Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966); and Hans Umbreit, *Der Militärbefehlshaber in Frankreich, 1940-1944* (Boppard am Rhein: H. Boldt, 1968)

[2] Ahlrich Meyer, *Die deutsche Besatzung in Frankreich 1940-1944: Widerstandsbekämpfung und Judenverfolgung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000); and Regina M. Delacor, *Attentate und Repressionen: Ausgewählte Dokumente zur zyklischen Eskalation des NS-Terrors im besetzten Frankreich 1941/42* (Stuttgart: Jan Thorbecke, 2000)

[3] Gaël Eismann, *Hôtel Majestic: ordre et sécurité en France occupée, 1940-1944* (Paris: Tallandier, 2010)

[4] Bernd Zielinski, *Staatskollaboration. Vichy und der Arbeitskräfteeinsatz im Dritten Reich* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1995)

[5] Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg? Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44* (München: Oldenbourg, 2007)

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