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Andrew Knapp, *Les Français sous les bombes alliées 1940-1945*. Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2014. 592 pp. Tables, notes, maps, bibliography, and index. 23.90€. (pb). ISBN 979-10-210-0461-0.

Review by Shannon L. Fogg, Missouri University of Science & Technology.

On Sunday, November 23, 2014, 3000 residents in Rennes were evacuated after workers discovered a 250-kilogram British bomb dating from World War II during the construction of a new metro line in the city. The online news article about the discovery noted in conclusion, “Rennes, a major railway junction, was the target of several raids by Britain’s RAF during the war, including a major attack in 1944.”<sup>[1]</sup> The discovery of the undetonated bomb near the city’s townhall helps bring modern attention to a little-studied aspect of the Second World War.<sup>[2]</sup> 1944 marked the apogee of the Allied bombing of France; more than four-fifths of the total number of bombs dropped on France fell that year (p. 18). Many of these raids were part of the Allied “Transportation Plan,” a bombing strategy that sought to paralyze the French rail system in the months preceding D-Day. Yet, as Andrew Knapp demonstrates in *Les Français sous les bombes alliées*, the story of Allied wartime bombardments has been relatively marginalized in the historiography of France at war.

Knapp’s extensive study seeks to remedy this blind spot in the “‘grande’ histoire de la France des années noires” (p. 26). Given the extent of Allied bombings (more than 20 percent of the Western Allies’ bombs were dropped on France), the number of deaths (approximately one out of every seven French war deaths), and the persistence of personal memories of the destruction they caused, Knapp explores why this aspect is not part of the French national memory of World War II. He argues that, despite the undeniable material and moral impact of the bombings on France, the story of the Allied bombing does not fit neatly within the larger narratives of resistance or collaboration: “Dans ce monde à l’envers, ce sont les Alliés libérateurs qui tuent des Français en grand nombre; ce sont les autorités de Vichy—et en leur sein, les chefs les plus terribles, les plus sulfureux, comme Pierre Laval ou René Bousquet—qui tentent, tant bien que mal, d’organiser leur défense” (p. 26). It is this complex history that Andrew Knapp carefully reconstructs to offer a nuanced perspective on Allied bombing policies and wartime France.

Knapp divides the book into three general sections, following a thematic and chronological approach. This allows Knapp to pay careful attention to the evolution of policies and public opinion from various perspectives and within various contexts. He begins with the Allied point of view, examining the longer history of the Allies’ attitudes toward strategic bombing, the rationale underpinning this tactic, and the evolution of targets. Throughout the book, Knapp adopts a comparative approach to underline differences between British and American policies, as well as to highlight the difficulties in balancing humanitarian concerns, political considerations, and strategic needs. In theory, the Allies viewed Germany differently from occupied countries like France where civilians were not considered the enemy. In practice, however, almost anything could be justified as a military target, and Allied leaders struggled with explaining civilian losses. For example, in three months in 1944, the Transportation Plan led to 16,082 deaths and 20,000 wounded. However, while each bombardment could be justified by a military goal, the French people who were affected by the death and destruction wondered if there were other means to achieve the same goals.

Knapp then changes his focus from the Allied point of view to the French perspective, allowing him to demonstrate the ways in which the French were historical actors and not just victims of the bombing. He begins this section of the book by examining the Third Republic's prewar preparations for war, including possible aerial bombardments. The French had prepared for an air war, but the government's actions were often ambiguous, divided between local and national authorities, and lacked the necessary resources. Preparations included civil defense, blackouts, evacuation plans, and the building of shelters. Each presented its own limitation and none were sufficient for protecting the French when the fighting began in 1940. Given the constraints of money, time, and commitment, Knapp concludes that "les Français se sont préparés aussi bien que possible" (p. 198).

Knapp also examines the interaction between the civil defense system, the German occupiers, and the Vichy government after the armistice. While the German presence affected French defense, Knapp argues that Vichy's role in protecting its citizens, "sans être totalement politisée, portera l'empreinte de son autoritarisme, de l'ambition modernisatrice de certains de ses dirigeants, et du paternalisme du Maréchal et de son entourage" (p. 215). Throughout this section, Knapp examines the government's actions including the construction of additional shelters, Vichy's mobilization of the bombings as anti-Allied propaganda, and the evacuation of threatened populations. Ultimately Vichy, just like the Third Republic, faced both monetary and material shortages in protecting residents and aiding bombing victims. Thus, even four years after the armistice, the French remained without sufficient protection from bombs. Knapp also underlines the continuity between republican pre-war policies and the authoritarian French State in this section.

Finally, Knapp goes beyond official political responses to address the French population's reactions to the bombing. In this section, he examines the ways that the French mobilized *under* Vichy as opposed to how they were mobilized *by* the government. In so doing he is able to engage in broader historical debates about public opinion and the extent of public support for Vichy. He finds that the French would and could mobilize to protect themselves or aid each other independent of official ideology or support, and concludes that "la société civile reste plus solide et plus solidaire qu'on ne le croit généralement" (p. 353). He also pays careful attention to the unique position of the French as victims of their potential liberators. This tension between supporting the Allied actions as necessary to victory and denouncing them as ineffective and murderous is explored through the extensive use of autobiographies in this part of the book. The reader thus hears how the French experienced the bombing in their own words. As in other sections of his study, Knapp pays careful attention to turning points and the evolution of attitudes. He finds that the French generally supported the bombings until the spring of 1943 at which point there was a shift to grudging acceptance, which lasted until the fall of the same year. This, he says, was gradually replaced by outright anger in the spring of 1944, corresponding with the implementation of the highly destructive Transportation Plan. This anger, however, was mitigated somewhat by the Liberation.

Overall, Knapp's study is wide-ranging and nuanced. He approaches the subject from multiple angles and engages with wider debates about public opinion, propaganda, Vichy's political and social policies, resistance and collaboration, and historical memory. Drawing on archives in the United Kingdom and France, including national, departmental, and municipal archives as well as specialized collections, Knapp makes a valuable contribution to the history of the bombing of France. His examination is both quantitative and qualitative, providing clear and useful charts throughout the text and amply drawing on primary sources as well as the relevant secondary literature. He adds complexity to our understanding of the Second World War as well as contributing to the literature that examines the gray areas and ambivalence some French felt about the Liberation.[3]

There were, however, some areas that could have used more attention. For example, Knapp dedicates a portion of his book to examining military strategies from the interwar period, but the lasting effects of

the bombings on the postwar period is comparatively less developed. He also emphasizes French solidarity in light of the bombing in the book's later chapters, arguing that society was "peut-être moins déchirée que ne le donnerait à penser une histoire de la Libération focalisée sur les conflits entre les Résistants et le régime." (p. 477). However, looking at French civilian responses to the bombings as indicative of the social situation flattens the complexity of the fissures in France at the Liberation. This is especially true if one looks at the immediate postwar social divisions exacerbated by the destruction caused by the bombing (between *sinistrés* and other dislocated war victims over access to housing or government financial aid, for example). At nearly 500 pages already, it is understandable that the book does not continue into the postwar period and does not diminish the study's accomplishments as it stands.

Just as the workers in Rennes unearthed an RAF bomb, Andrew Knapp brings to light the complex history of France under Allied bombs. Carefully researched and thoughtfully presented, *Les Français sous les bombes alliées* will be of interest to scholars focusing on the military, political, and social history of France at war.

#### NOTES

[1] <http://www.digitaljournal.com/news/world/thousands-evacuated-after-wwii-bomb-found-in-french-city/article/416793>. Accessed November 25, 2014.

[2] Some studies have begun to address this. See, for example, Claudia Baldoli, Andrew Knapp and Richard Overy, eds. *Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe 1940-1945* (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2011).

[3] Mary Louise Roberts's study of Americans in France also provides a different view of Liberation. See Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

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