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Elie Poulard, *A French Slave in Nazi Germany: A Testimony*. Translated and edited by Jean V. Poulard. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016. xxiv + 142 pp. Illustrations, notes, and bibliography. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-268-10077-3.

Review by Ludivine Broch, University of Westminster.

The year 1942 was a turning point in the war. The German troops were beginning to flail on the Eastern Front; the Americans had just entered the war and the Allies would land in North Africa that autumn; the programme of mass deportation and extermination of European Jews was launched. For most French people, though, that year was important because of something else: it was the beginning of the forced labour service which saw over half a million French men leave to work in Germany. Indeed, as the German economic and military machine was being stretched to the maximum and reaching unprecedented heights, the industrialists of the Third Reich were acutely aware of the lack of manpower at their disposal. Attempts to recruit foreign workers had already been in place, but they had not been far-reaching or especially successful. By 1942, requests for manpower were being imposed in occupied territories all over Europe.[1]

Western Europeans were considered the most obvious source of manpower for Germany's industrial efforts, and the French became particularly vulnerable to Nazi labour recruitment. In the spring of 1942, Pierre Laval marked his return to the government in Vichy by agreeing to send 250,000 French workers to Germany in exchange for some French prisoners of war. This volunteer scheme, known as *la Relève*, was not particularly successful, however, and turnout was low. To meet German demands, the laws escalated. On 4 September 1942, all men aged 18-50 and single women aged 21-35 were susceptible to being called for compulsory labour service in Germany. Then, in February 1943, the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO) was officially imposed: all men French men aged 20-22 were sent to work in Germany.[2]

For most French people, the STO was the pillaging of France's men, youth and workforce. As such, the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* became a rallying cry for resistance to both the German occupier and Vichy. Already, the ill-sentiments that were harboured during the *Relève* were picked up on by Allied sources, with British cartoonists regularly drawing depictions of humiliated and outraged French population having to go and work for the Germans. And if the French population did speak out in horror of the Jewish deportations in the summer of 1942, these feelings were soon supplanted by outrage vis-à-vis the deportation of French workers. Crowds gathered in protest around the labour trains heading to Germany.[3] Clandestine tracts and papers published slogans such as "You will not go to Germany... You will stay in France" or "Not one *cheminot* for Hitler!"[4] The young men escaping the STO--often choosing to join the *maquis*, those resisters hidden in the countryside[5]--became known as *réfractaires*, and heroes refusing to subject themselves to Nazi oppression.

The impact of the STO on French society at the time was not, however, mirrored in the memory of the German Occupation. First, the myth of the Resistance which dominated post-war France hailed those

who had precisely chosen *not* to go and work in Germany: the *réfractaires*, the *maquisards*. Second, as the horrors of deportation to concentration and extermination camps became more and more clear, the status of deportees became reserved for those who had entered the Nazi concentrationary universe. In fact, the men and women who had gone to Germany as part of the labour scheme were no longer allowed to use the term “deportee” to describe themselves, a legal decision which has caused many controversies.[6]

Elie Poulard was one of those men who worked for Germany during the war, and as he affirms on several occasions, his is a story which does not feature in the grand narrative of Vichy France. His experience of the war has not been considered with the same sensitivity or even interest as the stories of others--resisters, political deportees, Jews. In fact, “After their liberation, these unfortunate young men were often treated in France with suspicion, not to say as collaborators” (p. xix), explained his brother, who edited this English-language volume. So in many ways this book is about one man seeking recognition for the pain and hardship he, too, endured during the war.

Yet it would be wrong to assume that nothing has been written about the STO, and both the author and editor, his younger brother Jean V. Poulard, overstate the extent to which his story has been side-lined. Scholarship on foreign workers in Germany was slow to take off, and for a long time works by Edward Homze and Jean-Marie Vittori were the only ones available.[7] But broad studies on foreign workers were later elaborated by Ulrich Herbert and Richard Overy.[8] In the French case, the past twenty years have seen very rich and nuanced studies emerge on French workers in Germany, work which merits to be fully acknowledged.[9]

Still, there are few STO memoirs translated into English, and Poulard’s testimony becomes all the more important as a result. Moreover, this is a book not about resistance or collaboration, but about those millions of French who complied with the rules of occupation as a means of survival. For this reason alone, it is important: although the myths of Resistance and Collaboration no longer dictate the history and memory of Vichy as they once did, they still shape its many debates and questions. Here, though, despite a somewhat predictable narrative of passive resistance, we see a story of fear and survival—one which replicates the experiences of most French people during that period.

The book is divided into seventeen chapters. The first three chapters briefly recount the first two years of the occupation, when Poulard lived in Northern France and survived the Phoney War, the exodus and the months following the defeat. Poulard’s account of those early years fit the general narrative of this period: the officers during the Phoney War were incompetent (p. 3); as he and his family fled the armies and the bombs, they still believed the Germans could be stopped--“What a delusion!” (p. 10); on Tuesday 18 June 1940 he heard de Gaulle on the radio “by chance” but was later reprimanded by the mayor for listening to de Gaulle, so stopped (pp. 12-13); he delivered the papers shouting controversial comments such as “*Paris-Soir*, the newest lies from Berlin” (p. 16), one of the many examples of passive resistance in his book. “Like most of the French,” Poulard explains, “I felt that this was the collapse of my country. Everything was crumbling” (p. 12).

The rest of the book delves into more specific aspects of his wartime experience. In chapters four to twelve, he explains his enrolment in the Organisation Todt and eventual deportation to Germany where he worked on several different projects, the first being the construction of the Möhnetal Dam. Unsurprisingly, Poulard takes great care in explaining why he joined the Organisation Todt in the first place: “Should I obey the order or risk being sent to work in Germany? After much reflection I decided to go to Soissons. It was really impossible for me to do otherwise” (p. 21). The guilt about others being there already, and the fear attached to defiance, meant he did join the Todt when requested. As a deeply spiritual and religious young man, Poulard also saw this as a kind of religious sacrifice and obstacle he needed to overcome with the help of Christ—a theme which runs heavily throughout the book. His various sacrifices throughout those years were, in his eyes, “part of [his] Christian testimony” (p. 53).

Poulard places emphasis on his passive resistance to the labour scheme, explaining that “the intention of all those who were deported was to work as little as possible and to engage in sabotage every time there was an opportunity” (p. 21). He engaged in slow work, “drowned rails in concrete” so that they disappeared from the inventory (p. 25), and in Germany persevered with his Jocist rituals against all odds, finding great moral strength in the practice of religion. What comes through very strongly is the physicality of his job, however. The height of the dam, the weight of the tubs for the switching tower, are a strong reminder of the kind of work undertaken by young French men at the time—young men who had never been used to this kind of intense labour. And already, amid his narrative about hardship, hunger and moral defiance, one sees a more nuanced narrative about camaraderie emerge from his memoirs. It started with the pity he felt for one German journalist he was hospitalised with (p. 40), then a German lady who filled their bags with potatoes and refused payment (p. 46) and eventually a friendship was formed with Willi, the German soldier who he had met working in Hagen and who he met again randomly a few months later, “the same way one meets an old buddy after a long time” (p. 84). His story confirms once more that rapports with Germans cannot be labelled purely in negative terms—one old German even voiced his support for Léon Blum. “In Germany, there are also good people,’ he said” (p. 74).

The final chapters focus on the degradation of his daily conditions, the increase of fear and of spirituality under Allied bombings in 1944–45. The effect of Allied bombings on the German economy was anything but satisfactory. As Richard Overy has explained, Allied bombings damaged the German industry only to an extent, for post-war bombing surveys showed that it kept on growing despite everything up until the end of the war. Its impact on individual lives, though, and especially on those workers in the factories, is a different story. On 2 December 1944, Poulard’s camp in Hagen was the target of Allied bombing, an incident he witnessed with horror. “In front of this spectacle, we were gripped by a sentiment of horror...Our future looked bleak. We felt the shadow of death hover about our heads” (p. 88). Decades later, the fear of the bombings would still haunt him (p. 121).

Poulard survived the war, the hard labour and the bombings. He returned to France in May 1945, and describes the emotion of seeing his family once more: “We hugged each other, letting our tears flow, tears of joy!” (p. 120). The book stops at this point, but photographs of a visit to the Möhnetal Dam decades later with his wife suggest a life which remained greatly affected by this experience. After reading his story, this is hardly surprising; but as we know, this is not a story which would sit comfortably in the greater post-war narrative of Vichy France. This is also why it took so long to be published both in French and then in English. [10]

This memoir is an important reminder of the memory debates surrounding the STO. It also consolidates—intentionally or not—a lot of the nuanced histories which have emerged around the history of French workers since. Two things, however, struck me as particularly important. First, the mention of Arabs in the Organisation Todt. The Todt workers—those who were working for Germany but in France—are an understudied part of Vichy history, as are the non-white colonial and indigenous workers who were stranded in the French metropole between 1940 and 1944, making this passage a particularly important remark in the testimony. Second, the title itself: a French “slave” in Nazi Germany. If the language of “slavery” can seem intense with hindsight—Poulard’s experience in German factories remains incomparable to the fate of those in concentration and extermination camps, and he himself remarks at one point that one of the punishments he received “was nearly as bad as a concentration camp” (p. 48)—it was very common back in those days. In the railway clandestine press, for example, those in Vichy were regularly denounced as “slave traders.” [11] Although neither the author nor his readers can do away with hindsight completely, the very term “slave” thus throws us back into a time when that language dominated people’s accounts. And we are reminded, once again, of how important it is to listen to personal testimonies because, for all their flaws and inaccuracies, they do manage to capture some fascinating distinctions which have slipped through the net of time and history.

NOTES

[1] Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] For more on the STO see: Patrice Arnaud, *Les STO: Histoire des Français requis en Allemagne nazie, 1942-1945* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[3] Ludvine Broch, "Rescue, Railways and the Righteous: French Railway Workers and the Question of Rescue in the Holocaust," *Diasporas*, 25 (2015): 147-67.

[4] Ludvine Broch, *Ordinary Workers, Vichy and the Holocaust: French Railwaymen and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 129.

[5] H. R. Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[6] For memorial debates, see Patrice Arnaud, *Les STO* and Tal Bruttman, Hervé Joly and Annette Wieviorka, eds., *Qu'est-ce qu'un déporté? Histoire et mémoires des déportations de la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2009).

[7] Edward L. Homze, *Foreign Labor in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Jean-Pierre Vittori, *Eux, les STO* (Paris: Temps Actuels, 1983).

[8] R.J. Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) and Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*.

[9] Patrice Arnaud, *Les STO* (2010); Holga Elisabeth Bories-Sawala, *Dans la gueule du loup: les Français requis du travail en Allemagne* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2010); Camille Fauroux, "Les travailleuses civiles de France: des femmes dans la production de guerre de l'Allemagne national-socialiste (1940-1945)" (Thèse de doctorat en Histoire et civilisations, EHESS, 2016); B. Gaernier et J. Quellien, avec la collaboration de F. Passera, *La main-d'œuvre française exploitée par le IIIe reich: actes du colloque international, Caen, 13-15 décembre 2001* (Caen: Centre de recherche d'histoire quantitative, 2003); Jean-Pierre Harbulot, *Le Service du Travail Obligatoire: la région de Nancy face aux exigences allemandes* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2003); Jean-Marie d'Hoop, "La main d'œuvre française au service de l'Allemagne," *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale* 21 (1971): 73-88; Jean-Paul Picaper, *Le crime d'aimer: les enfants du STO* (Paris: Syrtès, 2005)

[10] The French version was published on a very small scale in 2005. See editor's introduction for more information (p. xx).

[11] Broch, *Ordinary Workers*, p. 129.

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