
H-France Review Vol. 11 (October 2011), No.225

Sylvie Aprile, *Le siècle des exilés: Bannis et proscrits de 1789 à la Commune*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010. 336 pp. Table, bibliography, and index. 28€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-06910-8.

Review by Mary Ashburn Miller, Reed College.

In 1798, Stéphanie Félicité Ducrest de St-Aubin, the comtesse de Genlis, published *Les Petits Émigrés*, an epistolary novel depicting the lives of several families separated by the emigration of the French Revolution. In it, her protagonist, Edouard, explained that he had built friendships with Catholics and Protestants, republicans and monarchists, even his father's former rivals: all were united by the experience of exile and shared suffering. "After so many catastrophes," Edouard wrote, "is it possible to still see those who have escaped such terrible dangers as enemies? ... Those who suffer relate to one another." [1] Old identities and enmities were replaced by the shared identity of the suffering exile, wandering without a nation.

In *Le siècle des exilés*, Sylvie Aprile examines this common identity of exile, not just among the émigrés of the French Revolution, but across the multiple communities of French exiles throughout the long nineteenth century. The mutual understanding created by the exilic condition, poignantly evoked by Madame de Genlis's fictional émigré, operates across time and space for Aprile. Her analysis is based on an observation that is both simple and profound: post-revolutionary France is marked by the phenomenon of exile, either forced or voluntary. With each revolution and regime change, a new group of exiles left the borders of France, and a generation of former *proscrits* flooded back in. Amidst the cycles of revolution, rulers became exiles, and in many cases (Napoleon, the Bourbons, the Orléans) became rulers again. The question of what this exilic character may have contributed to the political culture of both France and its expatriated citizenry is the focus of this book, which moves from 1789 to the Third Republic, and traverses the multiple spaces of exile throughout Europe and the Americas.

Given the vast number and diverse types of exilic experiences between 1789 and 1895, Aprile faces an arduous task: to narrate, organize, and interpret the experiences of hundreds of thousands of individuals who left France in different times, under different conditions, and for different destinations. Aprile asks in her opening pages: "L'épreuve est-elle cependant la même pour l'Émigré pendant la Révolution, le conventionnel régicide banni par la loi d'amnistie de janvier 1816, le proscrit républicain du Second Empire condamné au lendemain du coup d'État par les commissions mixtes ou le communard puis l'anarchiste en exil qui fuient la déportation ou la prison?" (p. 7). Her answer is hesitantly affirmative, based largely on the *emotional* experience expressed by the exile, an emotional experience defined by dislocation, longing, and unrootedness in both time and place. As she writes, "le proscrit exprime souvent, hors de sa terre natale, les mêmes sentiments" (p. 7).

Aprile's exiles are linked, too, by their status as political outsiders: from the émigrés to the Communards, the exiles of the nineteenth century were banished as a result of their *political* orientations and their opposition to the ruling regime. Aprile's goal is to reinsert these exiles into the political history of the nineteenth century, and particularly of the Second Empire. [2] She does so in three primary ways: first, by demonstrating that the émigrés and exiles of the first half of the century helped to create a political category against which later *proscrits* defined themselves; second, by assessing the

political culture of exilic communities, and finally, by considering exiles as mediators—and sometimes as diplomatic obstacles—between nations, social groups, and cultures. In its focus on political culture and practices, this book is in conversation with recent developments in studies of the émigrés of the French Revolution.[3]

While Aprile's analysis is rooted in a diachronic examination of the many varieties of nineteenth-century exiles, the organization of the book is explicitly chronological. The book is divided into four parts: part one, "De l'Émigration à la proscription," examines the émigré and exile experience from the start of the French Revolution until 1848; part two, "Ce que c'est que l'exil: les proscrits face au Second Empire," assesses the exiles of the Second Empire, who fled or were banished after Louis Napoleon's coup d'état. Part three, "C'est un dur métier que l'exil," is a brief, but highly illuminating social history of the spaces, practices, and organizations of exilic life, again with a focus on the period of the Second Empire. Finally, part four, perhaps misnamed (or incompletely named) "Retours d'exil," examines not just the return of many of the Empire's exiles under the early Third Republic, but also traces the fates of thousands of Communards who sought refuge throughout Europe after the bloody suppression of the Commune.

Aprile convincingly demonstrates that the exiles of the first half of the nineteenth century, especially the émigrés of the French Revolution, drafted an exilic identity that later exiles would compare themselves to and sometimes define themselves against. Former exiles became touchstones for later ones. In this sense there was a tangible "exilic memory" at work in France, both in renunciation of their predecessors—as Felix Cantagrel's 1853 declaration, "Nous ne sommes pas des émigrés: nous sommes des proscrits" (p. 147)—and, in homage to them, as when Quinet consciously modeled his itinerary on that of the regicide Baudot (p. 148).

In its scope, the book effectively argues that the nineteenth century was indeed "the century of exiles," and that this experience transformed ruler and citizen alike. Particularly in chapter two, which focuses on "the exiles of kings, queens, and emperors," Aprile succeeds in conveying the extent to which the most powerful individuals in nineteenth-century France were themselves subject to the vicissitudes of political transformation and banishment. The question of what influence the experience of a past exile would have upon a ruler's political identity remains open at the end of the book, but part of Aprile's argument seems to lie in pointing out that the ubiquity of banishment *demand*s that historians develop a better understanding of exile if they are to fully understand politics in post-revolutionary France.

But the book's most significant contribution is in the nuanced and well-researched parts two and three. While part one relies largely on secondary sources and highly mediated primary sources (mostly memoirs, often written years after the end of exile), Aprile moves into archival sources in part two to bring to light the lived experience of Second Empire exiles. Here, the chapters get shorter, more precise, and more illustrative. Detailed archival work restores lost narratives to the history of the nineteenth century, demonstrating how individuals survived and sometimes thrived amidst the difficult conditions of exile. Aprile resurrects portraits of French men and women becoming pioneers on the American frontier, taking part in the nascent tourist industry, or mobilizing their expertise and their French identity to thrive as wine merchants, tutors, and translators. She provides snapshots of Frenchmen gathering to write their versions of history at the British Library, assembling and voting in ritualized meetings held at a café in Jersey (p. 181), and organizing political banquets, including one held in 1851 in London that brought together some 750 guests (p. 183). These political practices survived even amidst a culture of suspicion, of fears about spies and government agents, and often under duress from host governments. This social history of the exile experience positions the exiles as participants in the practices of modernity, as Aprile herself claims in her conclusion (p. 287). It also demonstrates that exile was not simply a period of stagnation and waiting, but could be an opportunity for innovation, reinvention, and even at times a politicization that would have been impossible inside of France.

Yet this innovative, active side of exile exists in tension with the common emotional experience that Aprile finds manifested in exiles' memoirs and their literature, and raises the question of what relationship might exist between the rhetoric and reality of the exilic experience. Aprile moves between literature and memoirs that self-consciously represented exile, and archival documents that shed light, sometimes inadvertently, on the lived experience of banishment. The majority of Aprile's exiles considered themselves, or at least portrayed themselves, to be the victims of chance, subject to the vicissitudes of forces well beyond their control. Victor Hugo compared his émigré characters in *Les Travailleurs de la mer* to rocks thrown by volcanic eruptions (p. 147), and "tufts of grass" carried away by the wind (p. 148). Likewise, exiles portrayed themselves as embodying that most nineteenth-century of sentiments, nostalgia, looking back with longing at an unrecoverable past. But these expressions seem to be at odds with the lived reality of exile that Aprile portrays in parts two and three of her book, where exiles took control of their fates and fortunes wherever possible, developed spaces for political action, and used literature and narrative to shape their identities and write their own histories.

Both the nostalgia that is portrayed by the exiles and the active life that is uncovered in the archives may well have been—and indeed, probably were—elements of the exilic experience. But Aprile does not interrogate the apparent disjuncture between these two portrayals and does not elucidate why the narrative of a nostalgic exile was the one most commonly depicted in the exiles' own representations of their experiences. In fact, exilic writing could itself be a political act. Carolyn Chapell Lougee has argued that, with an increasing role for bureaucracy in defining national and civic identity, autobiographical writing changed to focus on interior, personal, and emotional experiences. This was particularly important for exiles, whose civic identity had been erased by the ruling parties or powers. Thus, in Lougee's words, "Revolutionary émigrés wrote their own personal identity, whether to contest, ratify, or bypass the civil identity a state and its papers would confer upon them." [4] The common emotional experience that Aprile finds in exiles' literature and memoirs may have been an attempt to provide a counter-narrative to the "civil identity" as traitors that the state had imposed upon them. Nostalgia itself could become a political tool, a way of inscribing and affirming a national identity that had legally been stripped from them. In this way, exiles were engaged in political action even as they wrote memoirs and novels, and contributed even more than Aprile suggests to the political culture of modern France.

The virtue of this book—its expansive scope—is also its heaviest burden. While a certain amount of generalizing is no doubt necessary when analyzing such a vast and diverse group of individuals scattered across several continents and nearly 120 years, Aprile sometimes loses the trees for the forest, particularly in her first section, where her depiction of the early exiles lacks the nuance of her later chapters. Aprile's émigrés of the French Revolution, for instance, are identified primarily as "*ci-devant*" nobles (p. 11), while the best demographic studies of the emigration, flawed though they may be, count nobles as a minority among the total émigré population, a fact that she herself notes on p. 27. [5] The diverse émigrés of the Revolution become, simply, a counterrevolutionary bloc in majuscule, "the *Émigrés*." This generalization robs Aprile of the opportunity to build fruitful comparisons with later exiles; how, for example, might one compare the experience of disillusioned republican or liberal revolutionary émigrés, such as those recently examined by Doina Harsanyi, with the republican exiles of the Second Empire? [6]

In addition, by focusing largely on the chronology and geography of exile, Aprile develops a narrative arc that is at times at odds with her argument: namely, that tracing common elements of nineteenth-century French exile forces us to reconsider our political history of the century following the Revolution. Indeed, if this book succeeds in demonstrating some of the key elements of the "script" of nineteenth-century exile, it does not always examine the ways in which that script was reinterpreted, repeated, or rejected, and what those innovations might reveal about changes in the cultures of exile and

of French politics. To give a few examples: we see in part one émigrés attempting to create a Francophone community called Asylum in 1790s Pennsylvania, and in part two, exiles of the Second Republic trying to found utopian communities like the Fourierist town La Réunion in Texas. We see in part one an often-virulent discourse surrounding the indemnification of former émigrés in the so-called *milliard des émigrés*, and in part three, calls to indemnify the exiled opponents of Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état. We see in part three the difficulty that exiles of the Second Republic faced upon their return to France, an experience shared by the émigrés of the French Revolution, some 90 percent of whom would again reside within France's borders. In bringing some of these common themes--community-building, indemnification, reintegration--to light, Aprile uncovers fertile ground for new scholarship to examine how the politics of exile and return changed over the course of the nineteenth century.

Le siècle des exilés raises many questions about the implications of the exilic experience and demonstrates the urgency of answering them. The exiles of the nineteenth century provide a glimpse into some of the most significant issues of modern France: they were "*cosmopolite[s] de hasard*," involuntary participants in an increasingly transnational Atlantic world (p. 55). They manifested the difficulties of defining and circumscribing national identity, particularly amidst the many regime changes of post-revolutionary France. They portrayed themselves as nostalgic for a France that no longer existed, a temporal position that Peter Fritzsche has described as "an imaginative and often radical subjectivity" that has helped to constitute the modern self.^[7] Above all, exiles, while a tiny fraction of the population of France, were figures that transformed both the reality and representations of French politics: Victor Hugo, Edgar Quinet, Chateaubriand; Napoleon, Louis XVIII, Louis-Philippe; Madame de Stael, Louise Michel. Far from being mere "tufts of grass" tossed about by the winds of political change, these were individuals who helped to define modern France, even as they were, each in turn, dispossessed by the French nation.

NOTES

[1] Madame de Genlis, *Les petits émigrés*, vol. 1 (Paris: chez Onfroy, 1798), pp. 403-404.

[2] This interest can also be seen in her 2003 essay, "Voices of Exile: French Newspapers in England," in Sabine Freitag, ed., *Exiles from European Revolutions: Refugees in Mid-Victorian England* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003).

[3] The émigrés, and particularly their literature, have been the subject of a recent wave of scholarship, including Kirsty Carpenter and Philip Mansel, eds., *The French Emigrés in Europe and the Struggle Against Revolution, 1789-1814* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Simon Burrows, *French Exile Journalism and European Politics, 1792-1814* (Suffolk: Royal Historical Society, 2000); Francois Jacob and Henri Rossi, eds., *Mémorialistes de l'exil: émigrer, écrire, survivre* (Paris: Harmattan, 2003); Stephanie Genand, *Romans de l'émigration: 1797-1803* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008); and Doina Harsanyi, *Lessons from America: Liberal French Nobles in Exile, 1793-1798* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

[4] Carolyn Chappell Lougee, "Emigration and Memory: After 1685 and After 1789," in Rudolf Dekker, ed., *Egdocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in its Social Context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum, 2002), p. 100.

[5] On attempts--and failures--to count émigrés, see Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Emigration During the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951) and John Dunne, "Quantifier l'émigration des nobles pendant la Révolution française: problèmes et perspectives", in Jean-Clément Martin, ed., *La Contre-révolution en Europe, XVIIIe-XIXe siècle: Réalités politiques et sociales, résonances culturelles et idéologiques* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001), pp. 133-141.

[6] Harsanyi, *Lessons from America*.

[7] Peter Fritzsche, "Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity," *American Historical Review* 106/5(December 2001): 1589.

Mary Ashburn Miller
Reed College
mamiller@reed.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172