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Rémi Dalisson *Les fêtes du Maréchal. Propagande festive et imaginaire dans la France de Vichy\** Préface de Pascal Ory Paris: Editions Tallandier, 2008. 473 pp. 32€ (cl). ISBN-10: 2847343555.

Review by Miranda Pollard, University of Georgia.

Rémi Dalisson, a specialist of modern French cultural history who teaches at the University of Rouen, begins his study of Vichy's *fêtes* with an anecdote. This investigation assesses a prodigious number of propaganda events and national and local celebrations. As he was working in the archives of the Vaucluse, a woman at the next table exclaimed that she had attended all the ceremonies of that period with her sisters, she in her white dress and little polished shoes. But, she qualifies this memory to add: "...non par conviction, mais bien car il n'y avait rien d'autre à faire et que l'on s'embêtait tellement en ce temps-là" (P. 24).

This memory, like so many other about life under the German Occupation and Vichy, may have been reshaped through the decades since the war. Few ageing survivors of that period would willingly admit to having enjoyed these childhood outings in the light of Vichy's pariah status. But, and Dalisson is certainly mindful of the conundrum for the historian, her recollection also speaks to an authentic, if ambivalent experience, which is a constant in both oral and archival works on WWII France. In a drab world of material shortages and constant parental anxieties, many children did seek to escape daily monotony and routine. For some, this might mean getting into trouble bordering on delinquency as Sarah Fishman works has shown. For other children, exploring the borderlands of the respectable adult world of rituals and public festivities was an adventure. For thousands of others, like their elders, as Dalisson shows, participating in these events was an obligation—and perhaps pleasure<sup>2</sup>—imposed by the *Etat Français*.

The bulk of Dalisson's 2007 study is taken up with a comprehensive portrayal of the multiple festivals organized by Vichy, often with German backing in the occupied zone, and throughout the non-occupied (at least until November 1942) southern zone. By looking at departmental archives, local newspapers, the memoirs of both Vichy enthusiasts and its harshest (Parisian) critics, regional studies, and the plethora of recent scholarly books dealing with various aspects of Pétainist political culture and propaganda, Dalisson creates a detailed account of Vichy's core values, and how the regime intended to communicate them in an almost daily schedule of civic celebrations. But it is his integration of another whole layer of contemporary sources which underlines this book's many virtues. Using the letters, *circulaires*, bulletins, instructions, tracts and brochures issued by multiple official bodies such as the Ministry of the Interior, Pétain's Personal Cabinet, the *Légion française des combattants*, the *Sécretariat Général à la Famille* and the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse*, Dalisson demonstrates the scope of Vichy's vision. A seemingly endless flow of communication between local mayors and prefects, for example, allows us a clear view of the administrative commitment of times and resources to celebrating this vision.

There is little doubt that the Révolution Nationale was to be systematically honored at the national, regional, departmental and communal level. No social space was to be left outside this new political *imaginaire*: "Les fêtes de Vichy s'inscrivent dans un vaste projet de conditionnement de la société par une propagande global [qui] devait "éclairer et guider l'opinion" et promouvoir les valeurs de la Révolution nationale" (p. 31). Dalisson emphasizes that the *Etat Français*, was well aware of the power of civic

rituals—and the power of those who would fix their meanings (according to Admiral Darlan)—and Vichy intended to mobilize “les vecteurs polysémiques d’une propagande modern. L’espace, le temps, le son, l’image, l’affect, les sens furent mobilisés afin que les français communient dans le culte du Maréchal et de sa Révolution” (p. 128).

Dalisson is well-versed in France’s historical and political legacy of “festive culture.” His *Les Trois Couleurs Marianne et l’Empereur. Fêtes libérales et politiques symboliques en France 1815-1870* (Paris: La Boutique de l’Histoire, 2004) and *Célébrer la Nation. Les fêtes nationales en France de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2009) establish him as the foremost chronicler of this phenomenon, although he acknowledges his debt to Alain Corbin, Maurice Agulhon, and Pacal Ory, among others. Dealing with Vichy, Dalisson also follows the well-established historiographical map: innovation is more to do with the select re-appropriations and ambitions of the regime than its radical rupture with the *fêtes* of the Republican calendar. Vichy did not invent its favored celebrations, May 1st (re-baptised *Fête du Travail et de la Concorde sociale*), *Fête de Jeanne d’Arc*, *Journée des mères de famille françaises*, and Armistice Day (Commemoration des morts des deux guerres—a necessary re-orientation in light of the German authorities demands). But Vichy did try to draw a veil of silence over their Republican antecedents. The eternal virtues of anti-Revolutionary past fitted well with the agenda of a new social order articulated not only in the slogan, *Travail, Famille, Patrie*, but also literally articulated through Vichy’s preferred institutions, the Church, the Corporation Paysanne, and the Légion, for example.

If Vichy was original it was in the attempted mobilization, which Dalisson emphasizes, of civic culture to the ideological imperatives of the moment. Although, in my opinion, he presses the issue of Nazi influence (via the competing German authorities within France, as well as the broader influences of fascist propaganda and technologies of cultural control) too deeply, he rightly recalls the complexity of the message and machinery of rightwing propaganda. The interests of Paris and Vichy collaborationists, occupiers, clerics and local administrations may have overlapped but they were rarely synonymous. How the French Mother, the New Man, Youth, *ancien combattants*, the Empire or national sporting culture might be celebrated was rhetorically simplified but it had to be effectively unified literally in the details of its organization on the day (or days, as these celebrations often lasted up to a week.) Dalisson provides us with diverse ways of assessing this implementation or “instrumentalization” of national ceremonies. In organizational flow charts, maps and tables, he amply supports his arguments about their spatial and temporal amplification. (Some charts, such as Figure 7, p. 345, on the evolution of the total number of fêtes in each zone, presumes you will find the chronological indicators in the text; while that on “the political and administrative organization of ceremonies in the northern zone (1940-1942) and the southern zone (1942-1944)” is so complete that it is hard to follow—a linear answer to any post-modernist’s *rhizome*, to be sure!)

What gets lost, ironically, is the story of an imaginary young girl in polished shoes and a white dress. Do we know what brought the thousands of spectators and participants to these public ceremonies? Or how they responded to the martial parades and public vows, the silences and the music, the flag-waving and wreath-laying, the spectrum of happenings which Dalisson so fully documents? Was it *fun*? In the circumstances of penury which Dominique Veillon so sensitively portrays in *Vivre et Survivre*, for example, or in the testimonies of Jewish *enfants cachés* who are precariously situated within Vichy’s celebrated *jeunesse française*—individuals who are already living on the margins of the French national community may not have been “available” to any regime’s political festivals and rituals. This is not the book that Dalisson set out to write, but his study may well make it a more feasible investigation for future scholars.

Do other unspoken issues merit attention? In his introduction, Dalisson’s claims (as Introductions must do, it seems) that historians have been silent about Vichy’s *fêtes*, this all important political and cultural project, apart from the rare special study of a specific aspect of Vichy’s politics, like Francine Muel-Dreyfus’s *Vichy et l’éternel féminin*. He offers his book as an overview of a subject that was important at

that historical moment as well as in the historical present, emblematic of that “passé qui ne passe pas”. The fleeting mention of gender at the outset, and later on, in his discussion of mother’s day celebrations (pp. 157-164), reveals both the strength and weakness of Dalisson’s work. In so comprehensively documenting who administered and what happened at the *fêtes*, Dalisson is less able to deliver on his promises of deconstructing Vichy’s New Man (and the New Woman). He mentions work on gender but does not seem especially influenced by its feminist analysis. [Author’s caveat here: I, too, wrote a book on Vichy’s gender politics, but it is not mentioned by Dalisson, so I can’t protest his failure to integrate its insights. It should be noted, however, in my own defence and in an affectionate “poke” at our French colleagues that few English texts show up in this book, as with most other Vichy scholarship in France!]

Dalisson’s lack of depth on gender is arguably paralleled by his treatment of colonialism and class, the Holocaust in France, all of which stays firmly on the surface. On the other hand, *Les Fêtes du Maréchal* admirably covers a vast terrain of events related to German control, Pétainism, local interest in national politics, the re-working of sports and youth culture, the downward trajectory of popular participation in official celebrations from a 1941 surge to a post-1942 drop-off. The latter development is well-contextualized in terms of the repressive machinery of the Milice, the notorious success of Philippe Henriot and the disappearing sovereignty of the *Etat Français*, as well as the more potent contestation of national identity which emerged from Resistance and *résistant(e)s*.

The greatest strength of this study is, however, in the comprehensive treatment it delivers of how Vichy envisaged and administered its festive program. Dalisson establishes not only the bureaucratic map for each of the major *fêtes*, as well as the ideological *imaginaire* in which they were embedded. He also details the events on the ground, their planning, their execution and the material means by which these celebrations were brought to life, in what he calls their “mise en scène”. The archives and *témoignages* Dalisson assembles speak to the significance of his chosen subject and will be the definitive account of Vichy’s public celebrations for the foreseeable future.

\*The title on the front cover is different from that on the book’s title page: *Les fêtes du Maréchal. Propagande et imaginaire dans la France de Vichy*.

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