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Hanna Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler: France 1940*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xv + 255 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-0-19-280618-5.

Review by Donna F. Ryan, Gallaudet University.

Among the most iconic images for the defeat of France in 1940 are photographs of French refugees fleeing the Wehrmacht, inching their way south and west from the capital, with whatever possessions they could pile into automobiles or carts or carry in suitcases, on foot, in trains, on bicycles, or even in baby prams. The May and June exodus, as it came to be called, would affect the vast majority of the French population, whether they experienced the frightening journey themselves, felt abandoned if jobs, poverty, age, or infirmity determined that they could not leave, or lived in the towns and villages that coped with the sudden displacement of millions of refugees. As the armed forces were routed and refugees and disorganized military units mingled, all political and social institutions disintegrated. Pillaging, robbery, price gouging, and wild rumors, along with periodic bombing and strafing by the Luftwaffe, left most refugees traumatized. Against this backdrop it is easier to understand the actions and decisions that sent some politicians into exile, destroyed any glimmer of faith in the Third Republic, and permitted the establishment of Marshal Pétain's Vichy regime.

Considering the magnitude of the impact of the exodus materially, politically, and psychologically, it is surprising how few attempts have been made by writers, filmmakers, or historians to grapple with these events. In French, probably the best historical accounts of the exodus are by Jean Vidalenc and Nicole Ollier, and the best known fictional accounts are François Boyer's novel that was the basis for the René Clement film, *Les Jeux interdits*, and Irène Némirovsky's unfinished work, *Suite Française*.<sup>[1]</sup> But now there is a gripping, well-documented, insightful account in English of the events of 1940 and their profound significance from Hanna Diamond. Drawing on memoirs and accounts by well-known witnesses including Simone de Beauvoir, Rupert Downing, Roland Dorgelès, and Léon Werth, as well as limited archival sources available in Paris, she has woven together an intricate tapestry of compelling narrative and astute analysis.

The study is organized in three parts, each with two chapters, detailing the exodus, reactions to defeat, and the difficult choices refugees had to make regarding whether to go home or remain in exile. The preface and part one, comprised of chapters titled "The Invasion of Paris" and "On the Road," is exactly the kind of writing that fully engages the reader and encourages rapid page turning. After four million Parisians fled, leaving behind about one-fifth of the capital's usual population, mostly those who could not leave rather than those who chose to stay, with deserted streets and the appearance of peasant carts because there was no petrol, Paris seemed to revert to its medieval origins (p. 3). The great majority of refugees from the city were women, children, and the elderly, sometimes pushed along in prams as one haunting photograph shows. Although no official order to evacuate was issued, many took to the road as it became evident there would be no turnabout like the Battle of the Marne, and rumors spread that the Germans would behave in ways at least as ugly as the accusations, real and imagined, about rape and

mutilation in Belgium during World War I. With mental images of Barcelona, Guernica, and Poland, many Parisians believed that the dangers of the road were less daunting than staying in Paris (p. 7). Yet the fact that no one was prepared for defeat also meant there were no concrete plans for evacuation. Some found solace in any indication of normality. The Jewish writer Léon Werth took comfort in seeing the grass on the Champs Élysées watered. If such a mundane act could take place, he reasoned, things must not be all that bad (p. 8). For many, the final impetus to flee came from the government's decision to do the same. The indecision of politicians regarding where to go and what to do next would pave the way for Vichy, as Diamond details deftly.

Diamond forcefully charges that the government failed its citizens with its poor preparation, mechanically directing the exodus by arrondissements, rather than taking into account the geographic affiliations of Paris residents, many of whom had relatives in the provinces, and lived in distinct neighborhoods in the city. But the underlying fault was probably the government's refusal to initially consider evacuation at all because it would send a defeatist signal to the French and the Germans alike. At first French people were lulled into a sense of security by the "phony war," but events at Sedan, complicated by civilian refugees on the road, led to a popular distrust of authorities and sloppy plans for continued evacuation. In scenes evocative of flight from African civil wars or natural disasters all over the world, fuel ran out, families became separated, looting took place, chicanery superseded decency, and urban dwellers unaccustomed to foraging or making do found themselves at a loss. Soon, feelings of abandonment and betrayal were compounded by fears of a fifth column or a search for scapegoats in foreigners and Jews. The death of the Third Republic would follow as politicians resoundingly were blamed for the failures of the military to defend France and the bureaucracy to organize the flight from Paris and the northeast. As Jean Zay noted, this was the first time the military lost a war and took power (p. 89).

Part two examines the results of the rapid German victory. As the civilian government displayed a lack of determination and the military became convinced that Britain would be defeated soon, bold measures like Churchill's offer of Franco-British union went nowhere. Both Weygand and Pétain were certain that only further chaos would result from continuing the war. Indecision by Reynaud and other Third Republic leaders about where to go and whether to continue the fight or sue for peace gave Pétain the wedge he needed to offer himself as a gift to the French and the only rational way to avoid a harsher fate. With much of the population eager for a return to normal and the kind of peace the 1918 armistice had signaled, Pétain could deal a death blow to the Third Republic and divert culpability for the disaster from the military. Political spin was probably never better manipulated. As soon as the armistice was announced, and before it was actually signed, many Parisians turned around and headed back to their homes, hopeful that an armistice in 1940 would somehow duplicate what happened in 1918. With the actual partition of France into zones designated Free, Occupied, Forbidden, Annexed, and Administered from Brussels, the reality of how the 1940 campaign had ended became tangible and alarming. For many, including foreigners, especially Jews, returning to Paris was no longer an option.

Part three focuses on the "Summer-Autumn 1940" and the question of what "Back to 'Normal'" might really mean. As reality dawned in mid-1940, reunification with family members became the first priority and the Red Cross actually reunited about ninety thousand children with their parents. Still, one hundred thousand are estimated to have perished during the exodus (pp. 142-43). Moreover, the return was often slow, hampered by shortages of trains and fuel, even though the Germans wished to expedite repatriation. Hitler had ordered his forces to be as friendly and helpful as possible to avert stimulating guerilla resistance and to convince the population to return to their homes and jobs and thus assist the German war effort (pp. 145-46).

The prospect of a return to a normal life lured many, though by no means all, refugees home. As German occupation deteriorated into a more brutal experience, French people understood what had happened as a devastating loss.

As early as June 17, Pétain, in his call for an armistice, began to exonerate the military and accuse the civilian government not only of losing the war, but also of botching the exodus. These events would be used as a foil by the National Revolution for propaganda purposes. Combined with fear of disorder, these bitter memories of 1940 served to make Pétain popular in the early months of occupation. Historians have long been aware of Pétain's esteem, but Diamond makes this phenomenon more understandable. Pétain's status with the French people would, of course, decline, especially as racial and labor deportations and material shortages increased and Vichy authorities became further implicated. But this thorough examination of the exodus and its impact on the French people does much to elucidate how an authoritarian regime, headed by a military man, could come to power after seventy years of republican government.

In an afterword called "Forgetting and Remembering the Exodus," Diamond turns her attention to the role of memory in examining the exodus. Noting that the exodus was a profound experience that touched nearly everyone, she points out that it has received scant attention from historians. Eyewitness accounts are generally truncated and historians have been leery of tackling the subject because of the paucity of "official" documents of the event, although she points out that departmental archives, in those areas most touched by the influx of refugees, may well yield valuable information. Instead, other historical debates, most notably about collaboration and resistance, have occupied much of the historical terrain. Attempts to cast the exodus as the first tenuous steps towards resistance have gained little credibility. Thus, Hanna Diamond's study of the exodus is a very useful contribution to our understanding of the impact on the French people of the defeat and their transformation into refugees in their own country.

This is a study that would be appropriate for both graduate and undergraduate classes as this riveting account puts a human face on the events. It gives new insight into the significance of the trauma of 1940 for French people and makes plain the political fallout of rapid military defeat plain. It is a little surprising that Diamond did not explore the gendered implications of the exodus more, especially given her earlier work.<sup>[2]</sup> But the universality of such experiences of confusion and feelings of betrayal and abandonment is also striking in this work. Some sixty years later, the failure of government to act with equity and good sense in the face of disaster, whether natural or human, is all too familiar.

## NOTES

[1] For the historical accounts, see Jean Vidalenc, *L'Exode de mai-juin 1940* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957) and Nicole Ollier, *L'Exode: Sur les routes de l'an 40* (Paris: Laffont, 1969). The fictional account by François Boyer, *Les Jeux inconnus* (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1947) is the basis for the 1952 Clement film, *Les Jeux interdits*. Irène Némirovsky's *Suite Française* appeared in French in 2004 and in English in 2006. Her daughter, Denise, had kept the hand-written text without reading it from the time of her mother's deportation and murder at Auschwitz in 1942 until 1990.

[2] Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France 1939-1948: Choices and Constraints* (London: Longman, 1999).

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