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Allan Mitchell, *The Devil's Captain: Ernst Jünger in Nazi Paris, 1941-1944*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011. 120 pp. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-85745-114-9.

Review by Pascal Ifri, Washington University.

Allan Mitchell's *The Devil's Captain* is a relatively brief addendum to his masterful *Nazi Paris* that recounts the history of the German occupation of the French capital between 1940 and 1944. In the course of his research for the earlier book, the author so frequently encountered the name of Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), the German officer and writer who spent most of the Second World War in Paris as a military censor and as some kind of cultural liaison to French intellectuals that he decided to devote an entire book to him. Mitchell nicknames Jünger "The Devil's Captain" in part because it was his military rank and in part as an allusion to Carl Zuckmayer's play *Des Teufels General* (*The Devil's General*), even though the general in question was a hero of the German resistance movement.

Jünger was a prolific but not a particularly great writer. He became famous in 1920 with the publication of *In Stahlgewittern* (*Storm of Steel*), an essay about his experiences as an officer during World War I, one of the first testimonies published on the subject. As a novelist, he is mainly remembered as the author of *Auf den Marmorclippen* (*On the Marble Cliffs*), an allegorical tale against barbarism, *Heliopolis*, a dystopian work with philosophical undertones, and *Gläserne Bienen* (*The Glass Bees*), a science-fiction novel.[1] However, when his name is mentioned today, it is more often in connection with his diaries or journals, especially those about World War II and his time in Paris. Mitchell shows that those diaries started as notes and underwent a number of revisions before they were published as *Strahlungen* (1942-1958) and in his *Sämtliche Werke* (*Complete Works*) in the 1990s.[2]

If several biographies and various essays have been devoted to Jünger, in English as well as in German, they neglect or give only scant attention to the four years he spent in Paris during his country's occupation of France, hence the justification of this book. Using Jünger's diaries and correspondence as his two main sources, Mitchell proceeds in chronological order. The first chapter quickly covers the first forty-five years of Jünger's life, including his World War I experience and his beginnings as a writer. It is titled "The Loner" as it introduces a young man "who habitually chose to go his own way" (p. 7). Even though he was a sociable individual, he would never become a "joiner" and would cultivate that independence the rest of his life. The second chapter, "The Road to Paris," relates his military campaign of 1940, up to the circumstances that led him to enter the French capital in April 1941 "on horseback and in full uniform under his steel helmet,...leading his marching soldiers" (p. 19).

The gist of the book describes in detail Jünger's various activities in Paris, both professional and personal. Fascinated by the city, he soon found a new home there and quickly became familiar with its best restaurants and cafes. Because of his functions, he was also introduced in the most prestigious literary and artistic circles and met and befriended some of the great French intellectual figures of the time, such as Jean Cocteau and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle. In addition, although he was married, he was a seducer who could not resist the charms of French women and apparently had several affairs, the main one being with a woman named Sophie Ravoux. Since those chapters are so heavily dependent on the journals, they also deal with Jünger's innermost thoughts and feelings and even his dreams. As time

passed, he became more aware of the precariousness of his situation, especially after a brief stay in Russia in 1942. His relationship with the Nazi regime was complex, but he had serious reservations regarding its racial policies and its excesses and often felt contempt for Hitler whom he nicknamed “Kniébolo.” In fact he was close to some of the protagonists behind the assassination attempt against the Führer in July 1944. However, faithful to his loner status, just as he never joined the Nazi party, he declined to be part of the conspiracy.

The final two chapters of the book briefly recount the last fifty-four years of Jünger’s life with an emphasis on the way he retrospectively viewed the years he spent in Paris, certainly, in his opinion, the most crucial ones in his life, and on his relationship with the contacts he kept there. The most important one was undoubtedly Sophie Ravoux, his former lover, to whom a postscript is devoted. Largely based on unpublished letters, it is the most original section of the book.

There is at least one debatable assertion in *The Devil’s Captain*. To describe Cocteau, Giraudoux and Céline as “collaborators” (p. 43) is stretching the truth. During the German occupation Cocteau’s and Giraudoux’s behaviors were far from exemplary, but they never actually collaborated with the Germans. Even Céline, who was a rabid anti-Semite, was not technically a collaborator. Speaking of Céline, Mitchell mentions that he “threatened legal action for defamation” (p. 76) against Jünger after the French translation of his *Pariser Tagebücher* appeared in 1951, but without going into detail. That is regrettable as the episode casts a doubt on the veracity of some of the claims that appear in the diaries. Indeed, Jünger attributed to Céline words he actually never pronounced and went as far as writing that the Frenchman was about to visit the mass grave of Katyn and that he was attracted by such places when in fact he never went there. There is also a flat out error since Mitchell writes that in August 1944 the collaborationist politician and writer “Jacques Benoist-Méchin was executed by ‘terrorists’” (p. 61) when he actually died in his bed in 1983. It may have been a rumor heard by Jünger at the time, but Mitchell should have added that it was a false one.

However, the real weakness of the book lies in the fact that, aside from the part on Sophie Ravoux that also includes interesting new information about Jünger’s relationship with another woman, Umm-El-Banine Assadoulaeff, it largely relies on Jünger’s diaries and journals and thus contains nothing really new about the man himself or Paris under the German occupation. It is all the more frustrating as a great many of Jünger’s diary entries are not only vague or cryptic, but also awfully mundane and banal. They rarely deal with important historical or political issues that could be of interest to anybody curious about World War II. Even those eager to know more about Jünger can only be frustrated since, as Mitchell himself concludes, “To say that Ernst Jünger’s person, his career, and consequently his writings were filled with ambiguity is to stretch the limits of the obvious” (p. 90). However, it is not the author’s fault. He did the best he could with the material he had at his disposition. If his book does not really shed any new light on occupied Paris, it will be a useful addition to Jünger’s biographies.

NOTES

[1] Ernst Jünger, *Auf den Marmorlippen* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verl.-Anst., 1939); *Heliopolis: Rückblick auf die Stadt* (Tübingen: Heliopolis, 1949); and *Gläserne Bienen* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1957).

[2] Ernst Jünger, *Strahlungen*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta; Munich: DTV, 1995); *Sämtliche Werke (Complete Works)*, 22 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005).

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