
H-France Review Vol. 16 (December 2016), No. 289

Nicole Dombrowski Risser, *France Under Fire: German Invasion, Civilian Flight, and Family Survival during World War II*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xiv + 312 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, and bibliography. \$38.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-107-52125-4.

Review by Lynne Taylor, University of Waterloo.

An ambitious book, Risser sets out to examine the intersection of the civilian and military experience under total war by looking at the mass exodus and internal displacement of domestic and foreign refugees in France during World War II. The exodus provides, as she puts it, "a vast panorama for exploring the relationship between state military planning, civilian security provisioning, and humanitarian crisis management" (pp. 5-6). Risser is building on a small, but evocative and growing genre of history focusing on the experience of exodus during the Second World War. Part historical analysis, part think-piece, part critique, *France Under Fire* perhaps poses as many questions about the exodus and its ramifications as it answers.

The first three chapters discuss the unfolding of the exodus. She begins with a discussion of the inappropriate and inadequate planning and preparation by the Third Republic for an evacuation in the event of a German invasion, and the prioritization of Alsace-Lorraine over other parts of northern France for evacuation, based on a mistaken assumption that those two departments were the ones who would be most affected by an invasion. She then walks us through the two waves of refugees, the first 1938-1939 wave consisting of both authorized evacuees from Alsace and Lorraine and unauthorized evacuees from Paris and other parts of the north, followed by the second and larger wave of refugees created by the German invasion. Risser describes the chaos of the exodus in the spring of 1940, which she attributes to both misinformation and mismanagement of the process by the Republican authorities, as well as the population's frustration and fear which drove it to break with the government's inadequate plans and strike out on their own.

Although Risser acknowledges that the French administration probably could not have done more, it is begrudging, and she is condemnatory of the Republican state apparatus for not doing enough to ensure the civilian population's security. Risser is as critical of the media of the time for failing to keep the population informed as to the progress of the war, and thus making it impossible for individuals to make informed decisions about whether to flee or to remain at home (and Risser posits repeatedly that it may well have been safer to stay at home than to join the hordes on the roads pressing southwards). While she recognizes that it is impossible for historians to determine the impact of the media's failure to report accurately the war's progress, she still insists that: "we historians need to ask ourselves if accurate reporting might have better prepared the citizenry to confront invasion and occupation" (p. 99).

She makes clear that, from the beginning, an important issue for the state apparatus was the cost of these refugees. At the local level, the mayors of those towns and cities who received the refugees were gravely concerned about the maintenance costs of the incoming population--demanding to know who was to pay for their care, shelter, and food, especially when it was unclear how long the refugees would

remain in their host communities. From the beginning, too, the refugees--and especially the women--complained bitterly to both mayors and departmental administrations about the inadequacy of the supports for them put in place both on the road and in the host communities, and demanded better assistance and protection as "militarily threatened civilians" (p. 56). Thus, she argues, in the exodus, one witnesses a politicization of the civilian population, and especially women, whose action (i.e. evacuation) "challenge[d] the policies of government passivity, objecting to being forgotten in the formulation of national security planning, and insisting upon the state's responsibility to deliver them from war's violence" (p. 84).

Chapter four, which deals with life on the road, explores the dominant and various "exodus story lines" (p. 110) that shaped the exodus narratives: family separation on the road, the loss of material goods, children's heroism, shortages and the resulting black market, rape and the threat of it, perceptions of the German troops, and the prevalence of violence. In this chapter, in particular, Risser pushes historians to pay closer attention to the sexual violation of refugees in the exodus, a subject that has not been a topic of sustained historical analysis in the postwar historiography of the French experience, although rape is now commonly recognized as and explored in other historiographies as a weapon of war. With the exception of rape, much of what Risser discusses in the first four chapters echoes other works on the exodus, such as Hannah Diamond's *Fleeing Hitler*.^[1] While Risser has raised some interesting questions for consideration in the first half, it is the second half of the book that carves out new terrain.

The second part of the book focuses on the period after the armistice and the end of hostilities and the beginning of the fight by millions of French to reunite with their families, as well as to keep body and soul together. Here, Risser explores the local, regional and national governmental efforts to deal with the massive internally displaced population, both French and foreign. How an individual refugee was treated in any particular community was shaped by a number of factors. Most immediately, it was shaped by the prefect's attitudes toward issues of social welfare (as refugee aid was seen as an extension of social welfare) and the effectiveness of local volunteer organisations in providing support. Initially, the public treasury was unable to cope with what had become a multinational, prolonged displacement crisis and there was no clear protocol in place to handle the assignment of financial responsibility for the refugees. This forced local authorities to devise their own schemes for refugee allowances (or "allocations," per Risser), on the assumption that the national state would ultimately reimburse the departmental and local governments. The refugees also took an active role in their resettlement, participating in the emerging rescue and relief infrastructure, seeking out employment opportunities, and advocating as individuals for improved state relief.

From the state's perspective, there were two central problems: the assumption that the relief was to be universal, and the duration of the paid assistance program. This was an expensive program, bluntly put. The new Vichy regime was determined, from the outset, to reduce this cost and to restore the national and regional economies that had been badly damaged, not just by the invasion, but by the Line of Demarcation between the Occupied and Free Zones, as well as the secondary demarcation lines delineating the Forbidden Zone and the Reserved Zones—a total of four main subdivisions of the French map (the Southern Barrage [Loire linie]; the Line of Demarcation [between the Occupied and Free Zones]; the Median Line [Mittellinie or Seine-Marne linie]; and the North-East Line). These lines had cut through the heart of regional economies creating serious economic dislocation and plunging many localities along the new borders into deep economic crisis. The Germans were as determined to use the Lines as a means of subjugating France and inaugurating a policy of ethnic cleansing. They forbade the movement of any goods, foodstuffs or employees across these new barriers, disrupting local economies significantly and resulting in serious food shortages in some communities. Risser posits that the Germans seemed intent on destroying the regional economies. The lines also quickly became walls that prevented most internally displaced from returning to their homes, even though many of them desperately wished to return because of the miserable conditions in which they found themselves in the south and because they saw it as the most likely way of reuniting their families.

Vichy quickly established the Service of Refugees to manage the crisis and to negotiate the repatriation of the some seven million French and foreign refugees in the south to their places of origin. The objective of Louis Marlier, head of the Service, was "to pressure the Germans to allow fluid passage of people and materials between the two zones" (p. 193). Ritter explores the negotiations in detail. They were complicated and drawn-out, with the repatriation effort chaotic and subject to repeated, arbitrary and "whimsical starts and stops" (p. 180) at the hands of the German authorities at the crossing points (initially there was only one crossing point on the Line of Demarcation-Moulins). Even communication across the Line was initially impossible, and never simple. It was only in late July that movement of mail across the Line was possible, under the neutral administration of the French Red Cross and handled through just three offices (Paris, Bourges and Vichy). As a consequence of the Germans' insistence that a percentage of all interagency letters be translated into German and kept on file (an impossible workload), all communications were restricted to pre-printed postcards.

Meanwhile, the Line of Demarcation and the negotiations around repatriation of refugees, Risser persuasively demonstrates, resulted in the "racialization of bureaucratic practices in France" (p. 202). As early as May 1940, refugees had been required to register with government officials in order to access state resources and state-sponsored relief. The German occupation authorities insisted on a long list of categories of refugees they refused to allow back into the Occupied Zone, forcing the French government to both register and categorize refugees, as well as plan for the long-term displacement of a portion of the refugee population. The population was soon registered and categorized, and the partitioning of France facilitated its ethnic and racial segregation.

Vichy was as keen to have the refugees—all of them—return, if just to reduce the refugee maintenance costs in the south, which had become a state responsibility. German recalcitrance at the crossing points, where they were inclined to close a crossing without warning or reason, or to reject a trainload of repatriates because it was not full or included refugees from excluded categories (many prefects chose to turn a blind eye to refugees from a forbidden category sneaking on to trains, on the principle that, if the refugees made it into the Occupied Zone, there were that many fewer mouths to feed in their department), resulted in burgeoning refugee camps in the vicinity of the crossing points. By the end of August 1940, only 1.6 million refugees had been resettled, with another 4.6 million still in the Free Zone. In an effort to accelerate the shift in the population and to force the Germans' hand, Vichy stepped up the flow of refugees and decreed that any refugee who missed their appointed timeslot on a transport would lose their state-funded benefits. The German announcement that they would close the border completely on 1 November 1940 simply added to the sense of urgency. Vichy's plan did not work, and when the border closed, a huge refugee population remained south of the Line.

By this time, these refugees had lost the sympathy of the state and of most of the non-refugee population, according to Risser. Their living conditions in the south deteriorated badly. For those who had repatriated, and especially those who had repatriated to the Forbidden Zone, the situation was not an improvement, because this was an area subjected to constant aerial bombardment by the British air forces. Indeed, because of the constant bombings and destruction, people were being evacuated from these zones into the interior. Still, and in spite of the dangers of aerial bombardment, on 1 June 1942, Vichy issued all remaining refugees in the Free Zone *laissez-passers* (*Ausweis*) and cancelled all refugee allowances, announcing that they were all to return to their places of origin, and the Service of Refugees offices were closed. The internally displaced were now on their own.

This is the strongest part of *France Under Fire*, in my opinion: the story of the fight over the repatriation of the refugees and the lines of demarcation, of the clash between the four parties involved in the negotiations between Vichy and the Armistice Commission: the representatives of the Vichy regime, the representatives of the Armistice Commission, local officials, and the refugees themselves. However, Risser pushes her material in two other directions it is worth exploring. As a result of the exodus

experience, Risser sees the politicization of women refugees who were their families' primary advocates in confrontations with the state authorities, local or national. It was these women who fought for relief. Crucial for Risser is that, she argues, these women's letters and petitions were infused "with the language of rights and entitlements to protection from war's violence" (p. 271). While it took time, their demands ultimately bore some fruit, when the French government established the refugee allowance system and recognized the need to provide housing. Risser argues that the women's claim to the right for shelter, food, protection from military violence were claims to a set of human rights. She writes: "No formal arena existed during the displacement crisis in which civilians could make their voices heard in rights debates. However, civilian women did make the voices heard, crafting in their independent letters and petitions to government agencies their wartime definitions of human rights. Their articulation of wartime human rights enforcement anticipated the need to revise not only state civilian protection programs but the laws of war. By describing the violation of their persons, property, security, and well-being, they linked the violation of their human rights to the methods of waging war and thereby helped to define a new standard for wartime criminal behavior" (p. 274). Risser acknowledges that the postwar period only partially validated their demands. The Declaration of Human Rights may have enshrined the family as the fundamental unit of society, but it did not define civilian or "protected person," nor was aerial bombing condemned as an atrocity or crime against humanity (something Risser repeatedly laments). But Risser insists that this was "one of the key episodes within both world wars" that "informed a postwar 'politics of protection' that now articulates a platform of rights of the displaced" (pp. 280-281). It is an intriguing and thought-provoking conclusion. While the causal relationship perhaps is not as well substantiated by Risser as her strong assertion would imply (she ends her book in 1945), it certainly invites further work.

A third theme of the work is the politicization of women, through their constant interaction with the state, both local and regional, in the pursuit of relief for the deprivations ravaging themselves and their families. Risser asserts that one can see this in the language used by the women, and that it was not familialism being asserted, but a new identity, that of "militarily threatened civilian" (p. 56). I am quite willing to be convinced, but I would have liked to have seen a closer analysis of the language used in the letters and petitions that shows the transformation of women's self-identification.

This is a thought-provoking work, one that is ambitious in its scope insofar as it is trying to wrangle several thematic lines at the same time. At times, the interplay of the various themes makes it difficult to follow the argument being made, especially as the three thematic lines are developed simultaneously throughout the book. But Risser has given us a new perspective on the significance of the demarcation lines, and of the quite fraught relationship between Vichy and the German occupation authorities that belies the simplistic image of Vichy as a collaborationist partner of the Nazi regime. As has been made clear in other works (Simon Kitson's *The Hunt for Nazi Spies* springs to mind as one example^[2]), Vichy viewed itself as an independent sovereign state and was determined to defend that independence and sovereignty. This would have informed the ongoing negotiations over the Line of Demarcation. In *France Under Fire*, Risser has given us another example of that tricky relationship.

NOTES

[1] Hannah Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler: France 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[2] Simon Kitson, *The Hunt for Nazi Spies: Fighting Espionage in Vichy France* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Lynne Taylor
University of Waterloo
ltaylor@uwaterloo.ca

Copyright © 2016 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 redistribution/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