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Jean Guéhenno, *Diary of the Dark Years, 1940-1944: Collaboration, Resistance, and Daily Life in Occupied Paris*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xxxii + 304 pp. Translated and annotated by David Ball. Biographical dictionary, appendix, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-997086-5.

Review by Sandra Ott, University of Nevada, Reno.

First published in French in 1947 and set primarily in Paris, Jean Guéhenno's *Journal des années noires* is one of the most frequently cited wartime diaries written during the German occupation of France. David Ball's translation and carefully annotated edition is the first to appear in English. Many historians of the period have used the original French version as a road map for locating grass roots-level wartime experiences within the broader framework of national and international events, tensions and preoccupations. In *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, Julian Jackson draws upon the diary ten times in order to give his readers glimpses of daily and literary life in occupied France as he charts events surrounding the defeat of France in 1940, the politics of Pétain's regime, the social history of organized resistance, and the troubled process of liberation.[1] Philippe Burrin and Richard Vinen make similar use of Guéhenno's work as they explore the impact of the occupation on the French people.[2] Citing the diary more than twenty times, Richard Cobb regarded *Journal des années noires* as "much the most illuminating" of the occupation diaries.[3] And rightly so.

A well-known cultural and political critic and writer when he wrote his diary about "the dark years," Jean Guéhenno had an ethnographer's eye for detail as he observed and endured the occupation of France, a country he so clearly cherished and whose swift defeat he sorely lamented. As David Ball points out in his Introduction (p. xxiv), the style of *Diary of the Dark Years* differs quite considerably from other contemporaneous accounts of occupied France.[4] Unlike diaries that document the author's daily routine in great detail, so often with "shorthand notations of trivia" (p. xxiv), Guéhenno wrote expositions, almost always in complete and elegantly composed sentences, that ranged from observations about the French and Germans in his midst and "the vulgarity of Vichy and the Nazis" (p. xxv) to his conversations with and criticisms of fellow writers—those whom he deeply admired for their literary talents, others whom he scorned for their narcissism and castigated for their refusal to engage in intellectual resistance by remaining silent while France fell under German control.

Well-known literary figures such as André Gide and Paul Valéry, who chose to publish their work in German-controlled publishing houses, are a frequent target of reproach. Referring to these writers in his entry for November 30, 1940, Guéhenno sarcastically noted: “The man-of-letters is unable to live out of public view for any length of time; he would sell his soul to see his name ‘appear.’ A few months of silence, of disappearance, have pushed him to the limit. He can’t stand it anymore... ‘French literature must go on,’ he says. He thinks he *is* French literature and French thought, and they would die without him” (p. 38).

As a dedicated teacher of French literature, Guéhenno tried to inspire his students through the texts of authors he deeply admired, such as Montaigne, Rousseau, Pascal, and Voltaire, all of whom he regarded as the guardians of France. When classes resumed in the early fall of 1940, he found his pupils disconcertingly “spineless” and overly preoccupied with mundane concerns—their exams and their Greek-French/French-Latin translations. He had hoped that foreign occupation would make them “more vibrant, more uneasy” (p. 27).

Guéhenno often focused his ethnographic eye on both French and Germans in everyday life. In the autumn of 1940, he observed that few people talked about the Germans but never stopped thinking about their presence. Food shortages and the prospect of starvation that winter preoccupied them greatly. By contrast, well-nourished German soldiers “in a dashing grey-green uniform” passed by in the street. For Guéhenno, they represented order “amid all this docility, this wretchedness” (p. 21). As a participant-observer in occupied France, he frequently eavesdropped on fellow citizens, French and Germans alike. He was not always charitable, especially in his regard (or lack thereof) for certain French women. In his entry for September 27, 1940, Guéhenno noticed “two little whores” who were sitting near him in a Parisian restaurant. “They were talking about their boyfriends: Jean and Maurice. Jean’s girlfriend was praising Maurice. ‘Gee, Maurice is really nice to you.’ Maurice’s girlfriend was praising Jean. They’ll steal them from each other soon. And then, at the vain exclamation of one of them (‘Oh, life is so complicated!’), they spoke of André, Georges, Philippe—other lovers who were prisoners of war: ‘You understand, I do have to write to Georges. It wouldn’t be humane.’ And I have the impression of two little animals, lying, wheedling, so sure of the power hidden there in their center, under their dress; that power sprouting out into a whole body, arms, legs, a pretty face with mysterious eyes, the better to hide. They are happy. The Germans are now allowing people to come home at midnight. That’s one more hour to spend with Jean and Maurice” (pp. 26-27).

In August 1940, Guéhenno traveled to his late wife’s village, Montolieu, in south-central France near Carcassonne, where he maintained their house (p. 12, 29n). Although he felt “an inexpressible happiness” (p. 13) at being there again, Guéhenno lamented that, under the “idiotic” rhetoric of Vichy, “the wisdom, the terrible wisdom of these villages, (became) so quickly submissive, so obedient...(The village) swears by Pétain as it used to swear by Blum or Sarraut. The master is the one who controls the price of wheat or wine. What matters is to be on good terms with him so he gives you the best price. Is this cowardice or wisdom?...This evening, I no longer know.” The “wretchedness” of the times weighed heavily upon him. “The French,” he observed, “are at the point here they don’t dare look one another in the eye. They are ashamed of one another. But night has descended on the village like a huge white basin turned upside down, with a spot of gold at the very bottom. The black hills all around seem the limits of the world” (pp. 13-14).

The themes of “servitude” and “freedom” recur throughout the diary. Guéhenno often used servitude as a euphemism for collaboration and called it “a revolting, degrading habit” (p. 204, among many others). In September 1940, Guéhenno and his friend François Mauriac met “in despair” over the fate of France and what should be done to save her. “I felt the calamity coming,” he wrote, “Perhaps we no longer realized how much freedom is worth. We talked about it too much. We thought we enjoyed it already. But for too many people it was a word that no longer had any power” (p. 21). In his diary entry for February 10, 1941, Guéhenno remarked that “Laval is Hitler’s man, and *collaboration* is merely a fine word for servitude” (p. 58).

On May 14, 1941, the authorities rounded up some 5,000 Jews in Paris. The tragedy filled Guéhenno with indignation and shame. He no longer felt “free to write everything down” (p. 85). On August 21, 1941, the day after the second round up of Jews in Paris and the opening of the transit camp at Drancy, Guéhenno revisited the Vallée-aux-Loups, located a few kilometers from Paris. Like other townspeople, he went to a site that had been regularly used by German firing squads. He wanted to see a particular tree: “We draw near. It is really there. The tree has been sawn off, ripped apart by bullets at the level of a man’s heart. It was used all last winter, four or five times every week. The earth is all trampled down at the foot of the tree. It has lost its bark. It is black from the blood that drenched it” (p. 109). His ethnographer’s eye for detail was drawn not only to the voices and physical presence of those around him, but also to vivid, physical imagery, the imprints of German atrocities.

On July 16, 1942, Vichy authorities rounded up some 14,000 Jews, including 4,000 children, and held them at the Vél d’Hiv, near the Eiffel Tower. On the following day, Guéhenno returned to his wife’s village in southern France. He accompanied a group of young children from the occupied zone to the Vichy-controlled Free Zone, which he found to be “a strange country, a sort of principality where everyone, from children of six enrolled in ‘youth organizations’ to ‘veterans’ wearing... Legion insignias, seemed to be in uniform. Where is France?” (pp. 164-165). In early September 1942, Guéhenno described his life in the village as “completely empty.” He felt ostracized and captured the kind of divisiveness that so often tore small, face-to-face communities apart in occupied France. His barber was the vice-president of the Legion, a veterans’ organization that pledged its support for Pétain and was valued by Vichy. Guéhenno showed up in his shop for a haircut. The barber “was busy and told me he would inform me as soon as he was free.” Guéhenno returned that afternoon. “Same answer. I’ve been waiting for two days and I finally got it. He longs to cut my head off but no longer wants to cut my hair” (p. 173).

Initial French perceptions of German soldiers as disciplined and correct had largely shifted by the summer of 1942. The deportations of Jews to Auschwitz had begun. Vichy had introduced the first measures of obligatory work service (STO, *Service du Travail Obligatoire*) in early September. “The dignity of distance and silence...was overridden by appeals for active resistance.”<sup>[5]</sup> In his entry for October 9, 1942, Guéhenno anticipated a winter ahead of “famine and servitude. The workers are fleeing conscription (STO). Our guests are frightened, victory is escaping them; they are organizing terror. I have seen hatred grow like a tree for two years. Now it is going to bear its fruit...and what fruit” (p. 177).

In his entry for February 22, 1943, Guéhenno wrote at length about the Germans he saw every day in Paris: “I do not hate you. I do not know how to hate. When you get into the Metro we squeeze together to make room for you. You are the Untouchable. I lower my head a bit so you won’t see where my eyes are going, to deprive you the joy of an exchange of glances.” The

soldier's badge bore the inscription *Gott mit uns*, which led Guéhenno to wonder what kind of God was with the occupiers. "A most peculiar God," he concluded, "Is he still there when you're in the firing squad?" (p. 196).

German soldiers sometimes emerge as human beings in the diary. In the same entry for February 1943, Guéhenno recounted watching an old German soldier in the square outside his school. Every morning around eight o'clock, German vehicles assembled under the trees along the sidewalk. A few Germans guarded the carts and horses. One old soldier captured Guéhenno's attention. The writer-teacher had attentively watched the old man for at least six months. The German's clothing and boots were worn out. He stood at the head of a team of horses. "He seems so alone, so resigned, so distressed...He only has one comrade. His comrade through exile and war, for all the many years they've been roaming together across the roads of Europe from east to west and west to east, through rain and shine, dust and snow...his comrade is a horse...an old black horse who has endured countless miseries and victories. Every Wednesday I see them exchange tokens of affection. The old horse pulls on his yoke until he can touch his companion with his muzzle, nibbles gently at his shoulder, so that finally the old soldier turns around and rubs the nostrils of the happy animal with his thick fingers" (p. 197).

In the spring of 1944, as organized resistance against the occupiers intensified, Guéhenno found hope in the courage and sacrifices made by the "terrorists" on the Glières Plateau when French paramilitary militiamen and German troops attacked them in the Alps. "France went on a retreat there with them (the *maquis*)," Guéhenno wrote, "and found a sense of her greatness again" (p. 251). As air raids intensified and "a showdown" with the Germans approached, Guéhenno wondered where he and his friends could go "and be sure of going toward freedom" (p. 251). In the wake of the D-Day landings on June 6<sup>th</sup>, he felt "overcome by gratitude" for the suffering and loss experienced by thousands of Allied soldiers and for the "freedom and honor" such suffering brought (pp. 256-257). On June 25, 1944, Guéhenno wrote: "Freedom is rising. It is a wind blowing in from Normandy, still gently. But it will blow harder and harder, purifying the air and expanding our hearts" (p. 261).

As the liberation of Paris approached in late August, Guéhenno tried to get to the other side of the Seine to meet some friends. He ran into barricades near Les Halles. "German tanks were patrolling. As I was going to cross the Boulevard Sébastopol, one of them fired thirty-odd meters ahead of me, decapitating a woman and ripping a man's stomach open. In the little streets fifty meters from there, as strange as it seems, people were sitting in their doorways chatting" (p. 271). The last entry of the diary (August 25, 1944) states quite simply: "Freedom--France is beginning again" (p. 272). Seventy-four years later, Guéhenno's reflections on the meaning of freedom have great relevance for our own times.

This first English translation of Guéhenno's diary offers a new and important lens through which to understand the experience of foreign occupation. Those who teach about the occupation through English-language texts and their students will warmly welcome this edition of the diary. So will a wider audience of readers who have an interest in French history and culture, especially those who are eager to know more about war and occupation from a personal, closely observed, grass roots perspective.

## NOTES

[1] Julian Jackson, *France The Dark Years 1940-1944* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2] See Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise* (New York: The New Press, 1996) and Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006).

[3] Cited by David Ball (translator), *Diary of the Dark Years, 1940-1944: Collaboration, Resistance, and Daily Life in Occupied Paris* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. xii, 3n. See Richard Cobb, *French and Germans, Germans and French: A Personal Interpretation of France under Two Occupations, 1914-1918/1940-1944* (Hanover & London: Brandeis University Press, 1983), p. 181.

[4] See, for example, Hélène Berr, *Journal 1942-1944* (Paris: Éditions Talandier, 2008), Liliane Schroder, *Journal d'Occupation, Paris 1940-1944* (Paris: François-Xavier de Guibert, 2000), and Tereska Torrès, *Une Française libre, Journal 1939-1945* (Paris: Éditions Phébus, 2000). For another diarist with an ethnographer's eye for daily life in occupied France, see Léon Werth, *33 jours* (Paris: V. Hamy, 1992) and his extraordinary *Déposition: Journal 1940-1944* (Paris: V. Hamy, 1992). The English edition, translated by David Ball, is *Deposition: Journal 1940-1944: A Secret Diary of Life in Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[5] Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise* (New York: The New Press, 1996), p. 195.

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