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Matthieu Devigne, *L'École des années noires: une histoire du primaire en temps de guerre*. Paris, Presses Universités de France, 2018. 333 pp. Map, tables, notes, and bibliography. €23.00. ISBN: 978-2-13-079480-6.

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This book is based on Matthieu Devigne's doctoral thesis "Classe de guerre: une histoire de l'École entre Vichy et République" (Université Paris Sorbonne, 2015), and provides a discussion of primary school education between 1938 and 1948. The dates were chosen, writes the author, to avoid the dangers of a too-narrow focus on the years 1940-1944 which tends to create the Vichy period as a time-out-of-time; instead, Devigne sensibly wishes us to see continuations and connections from the pre-war and well into the post-war years and notes insightfully (p. 9) that administrative time is different to political time: we need to be alive to these different chronologies to appreciate fully the complexity of unfolding histories in particular contexts. The book provides a solid and clearly written overview of the evolution of education policy across this critical period in French history, and—this is perhaps its originality—a good slice of life as seen from the perspective of the beleaguered administrators, fighting to maintain stability in children's lives in an increasingly unsettled and dangerous world. This slice of life derives from well-chosen quotations from the numerous detailed, engaging, and often lively school inspectors' reports that provide the backbone of source material. Whatever criticisms I may have of the choices made around structure and sources, these should not be seen as detracting from its overall interest and thoughtfulness.

Devigne writes that the "première ambition" of this research is "raconter une histoire de l'École et de ses habitants libérée du corset d'une ponctuation historiographique réstrictive" (p. 8). In particular, he seeks not to use the school system to reveal something particular about the Vichy regime: this is clearly a piece of research about schools and not about the regime, its ideologies and its politics. The latter come into the picture, certainly. But the focus remains firmly on the challenges brought to the classroom by the ongoing war, and the ingenuity, adaptability, and tenacity of school personnel in the face of these. As such, the book continues a recent and welcome trend of "bottom-up" studies of the Vichy years which see historical actors as more than pawns buffeted by directives from on high; instead, people emerge as agents grappling with practical and ideological problems on a day-to-day basis. The war in France had "conséquences humaines, politiques et matérielles" (p. 10), and these dimensions of experience are at the heart of Devigne's discussion. In order to investigate the world of the "habitants" (p. 8) of the school, the author has based his study largely on the reports, letters, and other forms of official communication from the battalion of school inspectors to be found in public archives—including *primaires, maternelles,*

de l'Académie (regional)—who reported upwards on primary school activity across this period. There are also a few published and unpublished teachers' memoirs used in small quantity, but it should be noted that the sources are mainly institutional.

A bastion of the Third Republic, and a key site for the shaping of citizens, the primary school was targeted in various ways during the Vichy years. Its secular nature and the often left-wing leanings of *instituteurs* were challenged, the former through the new regime's reintegration of private (Catholic) schools into the mainstream, the latter through the surveillance and expulsion of suspect individuals. The État Français was also an innovator in educational policy (or rather, as in other cases, had the opportunity to make changes previously proposed), reshaping not only the curriculum in line with its ideological goals, but also the structure of the education cycle. The details of Vichy's educational policy and propaganda are tackled in more depth elsewhere, although Devigne certainly gives a strong sense of what these changes meant in terms of their implementation: he is more interested in the way the school body responded and coped, not only to policy innovation but also to the more pressing everyday challenges wrought by the on-going war and its attendant restrictions, violence, and human costs.

The book is divided into two roughly equal parts. After a short preliminary chapter which gives a sense of French education up to 1940, part one ("L'endurance de l'École en guerre") engages with the period 1940-1945. Part two ("L'École républicaine à la reconquête de la France") ostensibly concerns itself with the remaining years of the study--1945-1948--but in fact, often draws on the wartime years for its material. Sandwiched between the parts are two short sections: a four-page "note" entitled "L'École a-t-elle protégé les enfants juifs?" (Devigne concludes that as an institution, it did not); and an eight-page "intermède" considering certain kinds of school-related resistance activity. The book is completed by four appendices--the first giving details of the personnel of the Secrétariat d'État de l'Instruction publique (education was downgraded from a "ministry" by the Vichy regime) and the reinstated post-war Ministère de l'Éducation nationale; the second visually outlines the different (and patchy) kinds of training teachers may have received across the Vichy years; the third is a useful table which shows the reform of the school cycle as proposed in 1942 (explaining which children of which age should/could be studying what and where); the final appendix is a map illustrating the concentration of Catholic educational establishments in different *départements* by the post-war period. The book concludes with a very brief bibliography. As with many scholarly French monographs, the absence of an index is frustrating.

Part one is more successful and more interesting than part two. Across its three chapters, part one provides discussion about, first, how a school service was maintained at all under the tough conditions of war; second, how daily life in primary schools was lived; and third, how the schools worked to protect the children in their care from the many perils threatening them. Overall, the reader is struck by the ingenuity and tenacity of school inspectors and staff on the ground dealing over and over with shortages of staff (men mobilized, men becoming prisoners-of-war, women over fifty removed from the workplace, and so on), and the shortages of school material. In the latter case, first buildings were damaged, destroyed, requisitioned and occupied, leading to creative solutions and children finding themselves in all sorts of odd locations for their lessons; second, as children experienced a high level of mobility as refugees and evacuees, rural schools struggled to cope with burgeoning class sizes, lacking furniture, paper and so on. And finally, as restrictions intensified, keeping children fed and warm became a major preoccupation for school staff, as their tasks shifted between the pedagogical and the pastoral. Devigne's documentation

of the hard work of frequently exasperated teachers dedicated to children's education and welfare is important.

Part two, however, suffers from a lack of focus, oscillating much more between policy and implementation than part one, and it contains chapters which stuff too-varied themes under their multiple headings, sub-headings and sub-sub-headings. The chapters are not without interest and would be valuable reading for those interested in post-war French education and arguments over *laïcité* particularly. Devigne turns first to how the "École Républicaine" was re-established after Vichy. Here we learn of new losses of personnel due to post-war purges of collaborators, but also of the re-integration of women in their fifties excluded by Vichy, and of returned POW teachers. The latter two interesting topics are not pursued in any depth. He also notes the changes and adjustments to curriculum and school structure as well as problems of school attendance, comments on whether war affected children's scholastic achievement, and finishes with a long section about Alsace and Lorraine; as suggested, the chapter is rather disparate. Chapter five looks at the "convalescence" of schools and children. Devigne begins with the numbers of teaching staff killed in the war, followed by a brief overview of how some teachers fell victim in this way or that. The next twenty pages of this chapter are sub-headed "L'attention portée à la santé des enfants," and here Devigne means during the period of the war itself (jumping back in his chronology). He makes sustained use of one document--a thorough report by an inspector of *écoles maternelles* in Marseilles. The document is undeniably interesting, but the discussion is not contextualized in the larger contemporary and subsequent literature on children in war; indeed, footnote two on p. 243 shows some reticence to engage with a wider interdisciplinary and international historiography. What is clear, though, is that the reader does not "entendre parler ces 'sans-voix'"--that is, the children themselves--as Devigne optimistically states (p. 242). To cite an adult's report on children as the voice of so-called voiceless children is not really acceptable. The final chapter of the book draws more than others on secondary sources; it considers the status of, and debates over, private (Catholic) schools, and, among other things, the exhaustion of teachers across the wartime period. Again, too many disparate themes are caught up in this chapter.

I will conclude with two thoughts which arose as I was reading this work, which of course--as with any review--are reflections of my own interests. First, I wondered how Devigne would tackle the geographical conundrum of wartime France: the diversity of everyday experience during this period is underpinned more by place and space than perhaps anything else. Devigne's research focuses on Lyon and Brittany particularly, with a good amount of reference to the Marseilles region as well; a wider range of locations comes from his perusal of inspectors' reports from across the country in the Archives nationales--themselves quite blinkered sources, however. Devigne does not provide a methodological rationale for his choice of locations, and there is very little engagement with specific local chronologies of war. This was particularly noticeable for me in relation to the regional chronologies of the Allied bombing which I happen to know quite well. I would have preferred a tighter, clearer geographical focus that gave the reader a stronger sense of local conditions, evaluated specificities or typicalities of experience, and enabled the elaboration of detail beyond that found in inspectors' reports--which are necessarily very partial.

Second, I have a particular interest in the people of the past as historical actors (including children), and a horror of dry, impersonal institutional history. In many ways I was not let down: the book is by no means dull! The inspectors' reports are rich in detail, and in many cases, one gets a sense of the tone, character and mood which goes beyond the (not very) "objective" nature

of their data. Some extracts were overlong, though, and suffered from a lack of analysis by the author: they were often left to “speak for themselves”. There is, though, very little from the child’s perspective. If a key aim was to consider the “habitants” of the school, it falls down here. One moment where children’s voices are heard is in the witness statements written by pupils about a classroom accident: “Le maitre nas pas frappa Jojo [*sic*]” and “Ce n’est pas de la fautre du maître [*sic*]” for example (p. 111). A few children’s comments are also reproduced in the extract Devigne uses from the *maternelle* school inspector in Marseilles. Moreover, there are surprisingly few teachers’ voices. Nine published teachers’ memoirs are included in the bibliography but were little used. Having read the acknowledgements, wherein Devigne thanks around twenty people who “ont accepté de partager avec moi leurs souvenirs,” I expected more. He states that the book “n’a pas toujours pu faire place” for these memories. I only noticed one moment where a comment from one of these people was deployed (p. 241). Indeed, in the introduction to the book, the author notes that these memories, which, it appears, were collected through writing at a distance, not in face-to-face interviews, were “en pièces morcelées, imprécises et incomplètes,” and indeed “une fois lues, ne présentent aucune logique sinon celle de la diversité des expériences vécues” (p.12); he continued, “lire devenait ainsi écouter des mémoires cheminant dans le temps et fouillant le désordre des souvenirs oubliés.”

While I appreciate that not everyone has the knowledge, experience or skill to work with memory stories, which are indeed slippery, this disparaging way of understanding the nature of lived and remembered experience was disappointing. There was no critical reflection on the design of the author’s data-gathering exercise, which appears to have flopped. Devigne expresses some concern about his *témoins*, writing: “J’espère sincèrement n’avoir pas trahi leur confiance” (p. 329). No, in an ordinary sense probably not. But professionally, there is a particular kind of moral responsibility involved when engaging with living sources. It was a shame that their memories were not collected or used with more consideration; there is a vast international literature on which the author could have drawn which might have enabled him to respond to this kind of source more positively and more creatively. The voices we do encounter across part one are those in the inspectors’ reports—lively, colourful, valuable; but these reports are not free of motivations hidden to the historian, oodles of self-interest, and unknown biases or omissions. Yet Devigne does not engage critically with their content: they stand simply as evidence of past activity and attitudes, and as such, the book remains throughout descriptive rather than analytical, traditional rather than innovative. These comments—as ever in our profession—reflect my own preoccupations; other readers might have other gripes, or, indeed, none at all, and can just enjoy the subject matter and the slice of life offered up here.

I was left wondering, though, what got lost when this thesis became a book, and what the author was advised. The abstract of his thesis shows a work divided into three parts, two looking at the Vichy period (Vichy’s school politics reflected through the perspectives of actors at various levels from high politics to grass-roots teachers; and the logistics of the day-to-day functioning of schools dealing with the rigours of war and Occupation); the third examined the post-war re-establishment of the Republican school system. I would have preferred to see this balance reflected in this book, given the author’s clear strengths around the wartime material, the real interest of the everyday politics and practice of wartime education, and the dilution which has occurred by amalgamating the first two sections in favor of the third. My criticisms notwithstanding, this remains a valuable and accessible book for anyone interested in life in wartime France, education policy, and the history of childhood.

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