
H-France Review Vol. 19 (August 2019), No. 161

Nico Wouters, *Mayoral Collaboration under Nazi Occupation in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France, 1938-46*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xii + 350 pp. \$119.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-3-319-32840-9; \$119.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-319-81381-3.

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Een burgemeester in oorlogstijd is a Dutch idiom that literally means “a mayor in wartime,” and it reflects the “adaptation, careful mediation, strategic collaboration, and ultimately...difficult choices” (p. 2) that mayors across Europe faced in the Second World War. Throughout the war and occupation, local politicians in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands mediated between the local community, the central state, and the forces of occupation. They dealt with food distribution and provided for general safety. Mayors worked alongside government administrators, a wide range of German organizations, collaborationist political parties, and the organized resistance. After the war ended, national liberation committees, the Allies, and ad hoc courts scrutinized their choices for evidence of their disloyalty. It was hard to be a mayor in wartime.

In *Mayoral Collaboration under Nazi Occupation in Belgium, the Netherlands and France, 1938-46*, Nico Wouters investigates the wartime conduct of mayors in three regions: the French Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Belgium, and the Netherlands. He studies major cities such as Lille, Antwerp, and Amsterdam, but also looks into mayors in dozens of rural villages and small towns. He examines local politics because he is interested in “what happened...when these democratic leaders were confronted with the realities of Nazi occupation...What was good governance in 1941 and what did it mean?” (p. 2).

His three case studies allow him to see how different national systems respond to the stresses generated by the war. As he argues, “an essential premise of this book is that any national system under the extreme strain of occupation and war will reveal some of its most fundamental characteristics” (p. 4). Ultimately, through a detailed analysis of the activities of local politicians, Wouters illustrates that in spite of the many differences in the political culture of Belgium, France, and the Netherlands, “under the surface the similarities prevailed. Local governments emerged as local states in all three national systems: semi-autonomous cells within the state bodies that carved out their own paths and directions once the first cracks of administrative and political disintegration became visible in either central system” (p. 323).

He bases his conclusions on what he calls a “radioscopy of occupation systems.” His interrogations illuminate the “complex set of interactions between foreign rulers, ruling elites, and local societies” (p. 4). Across northern France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, Wouters’s

mayors negotiated questions of forced labor, organized resistance, food provisioning, and the deportation of political and racial enemies of the Reich. Regardless of their pre-war political positions, they struggled to hold together local administrations because of the social disintegration and terror of the invasion, occupation and liberation. To understand the activities of his mayors, throughout his narrative Wouters telescopes between the most significant international events, the formulation of national policies, and the impact on the local level. He discovers that “in all three countries, local governments and mayors showed their truly remarkable capacity to sustain local administrations.... Arguably, the social fabric of local democracies emerged all the stronger from this ordeal” (p. 322).

Wouters’s methodology offers an innovative approach to studying the wartime. It departs from most studies of occupied life in Western Europe, which he claims generally offer top-down national histories or in-depth microhistories. He claims neither approach successfully answers questions about the larger patterns of collaboration (rural or urban), nor do they illustrate comparative levels of collaboration. Although he slightly oversimplifies the historiography in the French case, since broader national histories that focus on everyday life from the ground up have become common, his larger point is well-taken. Several edited volumes compare and contrast life in occupied Europe, most notably Robert Gildea, Olivier Wieviorka, and Anette Warring’s work entitled *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini*, but these works are largely interested in how everyday people learned to survive during the occupation rather than how their local leaders faced down difficult political choices.

Wouters’s impressively detailed comparative approach enables him to make broader conclusions about the how differences in the political culture of Belgium, France, and the Netherlands influenced political and social relations during the occupation. Was France’s centralized bureaucracy better able to withstand German pressure than the decentralized Belgian state? In the first two years of the occupation, the answer appears to be no. France’s departmental system was largely open to working with the Germans, but it also pursued pragmatic policies and gradually the French state “hollowed out from the inside” (p. 322). The increasing *attentisme* of French mayors came to mirror the more visible anti-German protests in Belgium and the Netherlands. Most mayors produced only an illusion of collaboration on the local level after 1943.

All three countries shared important similarities that shaped their interactions with the Germans. The Nazis occupied France, Belgium, and the Netherlands at the same time; they sought Western European foodstuffs, industrial goods, and labor to support their imperial goals in the East; and they envisioned a greater social *Gleichschaltung* between the occupiers and occupied in a postwar Nazi-dominated Europe. These expectations gave Western European leaders room to negotiate with the Germans.

At the same time, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands were different enough and Wouters’s investigation shows how their pre-existing political cultures limited the kinds of responses available to the central state and to mayors. In decentralized Belgium, a low-level occupation system—dominated by oral agreements between Belgian and German officials—allowed the Nazis to implement direct rule as early as 1940. By contrast, the French prefect system concentrated power in the hands of Fernand Carles, who prioritized the preservation of French autonomy. Carles worked closely with the Germans to achieve mutually agreeable outcomes; French mayors serving under him had less authority than their lowland counterparts had, but

they were also better able to engage in *attentisme* and were better able to defend themselves against charges of collaboration in the postwar era. These differences reflected pre-war distinctions between Belgian and French political cultures, but also choices made during the war and occupation. Even so, Wouters ultimately decides that “after the winter of 1942–43, the similarities between what happened on the local level in the three countries far outweighed the differences of national systems” (p. 321).

Mayoral Collaboration is organized chronologically and thematically. The first chapter, “Local Democracies,” sketches out the differences in Belgian, Dutch, and French political culture. In a pair of chapters, “Adaptation (1940)” and “Infiltration (1940–41),” Wouters examines the beginning of the occupation and the infiltration of the political system by the Germans and their ideological allies. The richest chapters—“The Limits of Nazification,” “The Limits of Good Governance,” and “Systems of Repression”—address a range of thematic issues including collaborationist parties, police reform, hostage taking, the Holocaust, local legitimacy, and information sharing. The final two chapters, “Disintegration” and “Transition and Memory,” deal with the collapse of the German occupation and the ensuing reestablishment of parliamentary democracy.

Wouters’s strongest chapters are in the middle, including “The Limits of Good Governance” and “Systems of Repression.” In the first, he shows how good governance and collaboration were often at odds but also sometimes coincided in strange ways. Mayors were responsible for the proper management of their communities, including the provision of food and public order. Collaborationists honed in on the language of good governance to legitimize their activities and even mayors from collaborationist parties sought to make the lives of their citizens better. However, all mayors also faced considerable pressure from the public, the national state, and the Germans, each with their own agendas. In Belgium, the increasing size of the black market disrupted food supply to the cities and to the occupying forces. These shortages led General Secretary for Food Supply and Agriculture Emiel de Winter to create an overarching food ministry tasked with the production and distribution of food. Tensions flared between the national and the local; many mayors prioritized the lives and livelihoods of their citizens despite their pre-war political positions. The national government’s agricultural policies failed because of the obstruction of local officials who prioritized local provisioning and their own legitimacy over repressive food regulations.

In “Systems of Repression,” Wouters examines the degree of collaboration through an investigation into how indigenous authorities managed information about their citizens. In the French system, the overarching department bureaucracy seemed to offer an “ideal framework for large flows of data” and local mayors “remained important sources of data” (pp. 148–49). Absent a mediating political layer, Belgian and Dutch mayors faced direct pressure from the Germans. Early on, mayors in both countries negotiated local, oral arrangements. Unlike in France, they could not hide behind regional or central powers and instead they “had to take their own decisions and responsibilities when confronted with direct German orders that bypassed central authorities” (p. 170). Faced with German pressure, many mayors caved but a few resisted, although it is worth noting that the French police collaborated more vigorously with the Germans than police in the other two countries.

Also of interest is Wouters’s fascinating final chapter, “Transitions and Memory,” which examines the revitalization of parliamentary democracies and gestures to the interplay between

mayoral politics, the creation of wartime memory, and the purges of political officials. In the purge period, mayors in all three countries largely escaped sanction, but mayors fared best in France. Wouters also briefly mentions how the memory of mayoral politics was politically problematic in Belgium (especially Flemish Belgium) and in the Netherlands after the 1950s. Here I would have enjoyed a fuller discussion of that phenomenon but perhaps that is the subject of another book.

Throughout his work, Wouters engages with the tension between individual agency and the limitations imposed by political and social structures. Specific politicians played important roles, especially, Fernand Carles in France, Gerard Romsée in Belgium, and Karel Johannes Frederiks in the Netherlands. Fernand Carles stands out as particularly influential. Unlike his counterparts in Belgium and the Netherlands, Carles possessed the immense power of a centralized bureaucracy, but he was also isolated from the Vichy state. He strongly defended French autonomy, even when that meant overt collaboration with the Germans. He shielded French public officials from German scrutiny but voluntarily handed over French citizens for deportation. Wouters was only able to find one case where Carles “tried to limit French police cooperation with German repression” (p. 202).

At the same time, structures still mattered. Wouters also helpfully delves into the role of collaborationist parties. In France, the pre-war weakness of collaborationist parties continued; they were essentially non-existent in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. Overtly collaborationist mayors were also rare—Lille’s mayor Paul Dehove was a notable example—and most mayors were socialists who retained local legitimacy. In Belgium and the Netherlands, the process for appointing mayors was different. A large number of Belgian mayors fled during the exodus in 1940, allowing regional governors to appoint Rexists and Flemish nationalists as interim mayors. In the Netherlands, the central government simply appointed mayors. The turnover of local officials in both countries increased during the war as mayors resigned in large numbers once working with the Germans became politically fraught. Newly appointed collaborationist politicians still faced opposition from old mayors, municipal councils, and resistance organizations. The Flemish nationalist party, the VNV, increasingly frustrated on the local level, blamed the Flemish people for their disappointments and as Wouters points out, “the Flemish people themselves became the enemy” (p. 135), which posed a fundamental problem for a Flemish party!

Wouters’s most provocative argument is what he calls the persistence of “deeper historic cultures of democracy” (p. 5). Parliamentary democracies collapsed in all three countries. Administrative states oversaw Belgium and the Netherlands, but in France, a revolutionary Vichy regime engaged in wholesale political reform. Despite the catastrophic failure of interwar democracy, “destatification was countered when local democracies turned out to be small states” (p. 330). Sites of local democracy proved robust. In France, pre-war socialist mayors retained their positions until after the Miner’s Strike of 1943. In Belgium, in the face of public pressure, collaborationist mayors largely failed to generate significant public legitimacy—although counter-examples abound—and in 1944 quickly adapted to the impending Allied victory with open demonstrations of their friendliness to the resistance, including the release of prisoners. These “local states” remained crucial for the delivery of vital resources including food and were the “prerequisite for regaining national democratic legitimacy relatively quickly” in the postwar period (p. 330).

Throughout, Wouters illustrates his mastery of the primary source material. He is clearly most at home in the Belgian archives--unsurprising since he has a position at the Belgian State Archives. In France, he works extensively in the departmental archives in Lille. His Dutch sources are more limited but nonetheless remain quite extensive, including eighty postwar trial dossiers.

Although Wouters archival work is impressive, the absolute comprehensiveness of his research also presents some disadvantages. His multifocal approach occasionally lacks depth. We learn about Carles, Frederiks, and Romsée, but little else about most of the mayors in his book. Why did some mayors, including the mayor of Quincy, list himself first on a list of hostages? Wouters explains that it was "a strategic move to strengthen personal legitimacy" (p. 204), but it is hard to know if that is the whole story decontextualized from other happenings in the city. Certainly, the good mayor must have strongly suspected he would not face execution as so many communist hostages had after 1941.

At times, Wouters's completeness is the problem because he seems to have an example for everything. Some mayors rescued Allied pilots. Others turned them in to the Germans. A few mayors rescued Jews; others were bystanders; a few actively participated in the round-up of Jews. Other than analyses of their personalities, Wouters offers little explanation for the diverse strategies pursued by mayors, except for their desire to maintain public legitimacy and survive confrontations with the Germans, the resistance, and the postwar courts. Occasionally, when he does attempt to address mayoral motives, Wouters dips into strange pop-psychological analyses. He bases some of his conclusions on the testimonies of psychologists during postwar trials, but Wouters never fully contextualizes those records. Were these psychologists appearing for the prosecution or the defense?

An additional minor quibble: readers need to be on their toes as Wouters navigates deftly between the three cases. He assumes a fair bit of knowledge about tiny localities in each country. It would have been helpful to have a map (or even possibly an online GIS) of the specific localities.

Overall, Nico Wouters's *Mayoral Collaboration* offers a comprehensive account of mayoral activities in Belgium, the French Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and the Netherlands during the Second World War. His work is well-researched and offers an interesting interpretation about the resilience of democratic culture in the face of totalitarian repression. Specialists in the field and interested generalists should read it.

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ISSN 1553-9172