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Ludivine Broch, *Ordinary Workers, Vichy and the Holocaust: French Railwaymen and the Second World War*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xx + 280 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-107-03956-8.

Review by Donald Reid, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Political historians of France have long pursued narratives of continuity and change from the interwar years through the Occupation to the postwar period. However, social historians have on the whole focused on the distinct, exceptional nature of experiences during the Occupation rather than interpreting the period in terms of what preceded and what followed it. Although Ludivine Broch devotes the bulk of *Ordinary Workers, Vichy and the Holocaust: French Railwaymen and the Second World War* to the Occupation, her argument hinges on an examination of how and why the Occupation was “a turning point in *cheminots*’ (railwaymen’s) political but also socio-cultural identity” (p. 12).

Broch begins with a presentation of *cheminots* and railway managers before the war. The more than 400,000 *cheminots* were not monolithic in terms of their work and their politics. Although she does not explore the particular world of suffering and pain that Paul Nizan dissects in his novel about his railwayman father, *Antoine Bloyé*, she does emphasize the particular work culture focused on obedience and discipline that *cheminots* shared. They were concerned with protecting the railways and railway equipment, and were therefore hostile to sabotage as a tactic in job actions. *Cheminots* often pursued different tracks than other elements of organized labor, most notably by not participating in the general strike in 1936, an act that Broch attributes to their anticipation that the railways would be nationalized, as they were in 1937.

During the Occupation, the importance of the railways to France and to the Germans assured that *cheminots* received a degree of special treatment. Half of the *cheminot* POWs were sent back to France right away. Some *cheminots* were sent to Germany to work and others worked under the direction of Germans in France. All worked long hours in difficult conditions. If the direction of the nationalized Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer (SNCF) initially sought to cooperate with the German occupation authorities, it increasingly focused on preserving a modicum of French control of the railways, including its most valuable asset, the labor force. The SNCF had only limited success and Broch suggests that the disappointments of these early years of nationalization undercut the insular, conservative *cheminots*’ political culture: “after several decades of absence from the scene of active working-class protest, the 1943-44 period was a moment of renewal for the *cheminot* community” (p. 141).

During the Occupation, *cheminots* stole from the railways at a much higher rate than before the war to feed their families, to participate in the black market and, in some cases, to aid the resistance. Over the course of the war, a number of railway workers engaged in resistance, but not in groups composed solely of *cheminots*. Their acts of sabotage, previously anathema, could take many forms from mislabeling cars to more violent acts directed against trains carrying supplies, not passengers. They sought to impede the Germans and to convince the Allies to ease up on their ineffective bombing of railway targets, which created extensive civilian collateral damage. Broch sees the dual qualities in *cheminots'* job actions as well. Rather than identifying strikes during the war solely in terms of resistance against Germany, she recognizes that *cheminots'* strikes for better pay and working conditions were acts of resistance because of the central place of the railways in the Occupation economy, but were directed against the SNCF. This, she argues, was a lasting legacy of wartime activism.

After Liberation, *cheminots* played a leading role in the “battle of production,” when they were asked to put in the extra labor for the Republic that they had been called on to do for the collaborationist Vichy Regime. In this sense, the exceptional period of the Occupation did not fully end until 1947, when *cheminots* took the leading role in strikes in France as they would continue to do in the Fourth and Fifth Republics. While *cheminots'* militancy is often explained in terms of changes in national politics, Broch innovates in her argument that “The Vichy years allowed *cheminots* to redefine their relationship to their work, to the SNCF and to the state such that they would change their protest tactics in the post-war period.” (p. 241).

Broch put “Holocaust” in her title and asks: did the SNCF participate in the persecution of its Jewish employees? What was the role of the SNCF in the transport of Jews from France to the camps? Why did French *cheminots* not stop trains headed to the camps? Broch examines the fates Jewish SNCF employees. She finds neither anti-Semitism nor philo-Semitism; the SNCF and a range of individual employees sought to assist persecuted Jewish colleagues because they were *cheminots*. Broch devotes a good deal of attention to charges that the SNCF profited from the transport of Jews to their deaths. During the Occupation, the SNCF did not question what it was told to ship, expected payment for all services rendered, and used cattle cars as they had earlier when moving large numbers of French during the exodus in 1940. Some seventy years later, the SNCF apologized and paid reparations. From Broch’s perspective, the SNCF was looking out for its business interests then just as it had during the war; the enterprise feared it would lose contracts in the United States if it did not settle the cases brought against it.

The Germans complained of particular cases in which individuals were able to exit cars through faulty floorboards and the like, with the assumption that the *cheminots* were responsible for the upkeep of the cars, whether they had arranged such escapes or not. However, what of the question raised by Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus forty years ago, of why *cheminots* did not prevent cars with Jewish deportees from reaching their destination? The resistance as a whole did little to impede the deportation of Jews from France. While Broch does not excuse the *cheminots*, she views the issue of railway cars transporting Jews within the framework of their work culture. She asks, as she believes they could have, how many prisoners would have died in acts of sabotage and what would happen to survivors. Since the *cheminots* did not know the fate of prisoners being sent east, they may have felt that sabotage would place the deportees at greater risk. As for sabotaging the rail lines, they knew that German needs would be given precedence and it was French goods and civilian passengers who would be stranded, not trains transporting what the Germans wanted carried.

Another term of interest in Broch's title is "ordinary workers." Early in the book, she uses "ordinary worker" to connote unskilled workers as opposed to locomotive engineers (p. 28) or for the labor force as a whole differentiated from management (pp. 29, 37). However, Broch's use of "ordinary" for *cheminots* in the title is in relation to other workers during the Occupation, when railway workers were seen by some as being treated differently than the majority of workers. And *cheminots* emerged from the war with the reputation of having been resisters, unlike many workers. Broch uses "ordinary" to engage with these two accounts. She brings out the hardships they experienced and characterizes the *cheminots'* practice of theft during the Occupation as "the tactics of the ordinary worker" (p. 102). *Cheminots'* situation was different from other workers in that they had more access to goods to steal, but her point is that their response was that of ordinary workers.

The same issue arises with respect to the resistance. Whether viewed in terms of resistance activity or the failure to stop deportation trains, Broch sees the war itself as a time when *cheminots* were "neither heroes nor bastards," but "ordinary workers" (p. 241). Although she does not suggest figures of her own, she quotes approvingly a *cheminot* she interviewed who suggests that eighty percent of *cheminots* were working men trying to survive the war with the remainder divided equally between resisters and collaborators. Broch pays particular attention to Pétainiste *cheminots* and those who worked comfortably with German railwaymen in France or in Germany as a counterbalance to the representation of railway workers as resisters.

In sum, Broch argues that by becoming the ordinary workers they had not been before the war, *cheminots* "effected a shift in mentalities" (p. 9). Achieving nationalization in 1937 had seemingly completed the setting-apart of railway workers. But one of their first experiences of nationalization was social and political exploitation during the Occupation. Only a minority of *cheminots* worked in resistance organizations, but after the war it became the representation of *cheminots* as resisters that made them other than "ordinary workers," not so much their actual wartime experiences. During the war they had confronted the SNCF in conflicts which inextricably bound national politics and the struggle with their employer. This was what they brought to the postwar period. That not all or even most *cheminots* were active resisters before D-Day is in line with other recent work, but Broch's point is that the "memory" that they were is crucial to understanding their postwar history, when they would stand out from other workers for their militance.

Broch presents an important account of a large group of workers and their employers, "a community simultaneously unique and ordinary" during the Occupation (p. 240). She examines a group of workers viewed by themselves and by others as exceptional who became "ordinary workers" at the time that these workers expected that nationalization would secure their special status. While the history of *cheminots* after the war is that of a change in work processes--the end of the iron horse of yore--and the dramatic decline in size of the labor force, Broch innovates in assessing the impact and legacy of particular historical situations and their memory on the representations of labor by workers themselves and in the society in which they lived.

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