
H-France Review Vol. 20 (November 2020), No. 205

Ronald C. Rosbottom, *Sudden Courage: Youth in France Confront the Germans, 1940-1945*. New York: Custom House, 2019. xiv + 320 pp. Map, selective chronology, bibliography, notes, and index. \$27.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-06-247002-7.

Review by Susan B. Whitney, Carleton University.

Ronald C. Rosbottom is that rare scholar of France who has transitioned from academic to trade publishing. After an academic career that saw the publication of two monographs on French novelists and three edited collections of essays, as well as terms as Chair of the Romance Languages Department at Ohio State and as Dean of the Faculty at Amherst College, Rosbottom published *When Paris Went Dark: The City of Light under German Occupation, 1940-1944* with Little, Brown in 2014. The book was widely reviewed in the United States and Britain and long listed for the National Book Award. With *Sudden Courage*, Rosbottom has turned his attention to another aspect of France's Second World War past, the role of youth in the French resistance. Why, he asks, were a "substantial percentage" (p. 1) of those who resisted in France adolescents and fully 34% of resisters under the age of 21? What form did young people's resistance activities take? Although these questions have received "some attention" (p. 1) in France, Rosbottom writes, they have been rarely addressed in English.

The book's eight chapters pivot around narrative accounts of youth resistance. The book's first chapter focuses on Guy Môquet, France's most famous adolescent resister. The son of a Communist deputy, Môquet was arrested in October 1940 at the age of sixteen for illegally pasting *papillons* (stickers) protesting the arrest of Communist deputies, including his father, on walls and other public surfaces in Paris, and for throwing anti-Vichy tracts from the balcony of Paris cinemas. Môquet was executed during the fall of 1941 in retaliation for the murder of a German officer in Nantes, apparently telling the priest accompanying him during his last minutes, "History's memory of me will be that I was the youngest of the condemned" (p. 27).

The Communists were quick to mythologize Môquet, but they were not alone in honoring his sacrifice. In 1946, Môquet was made Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur and had a metro stop and a street in the 17th arrondissement named in his honor. In 2007, President Nicholas Sarkozy added to Môquet's renown. Sarkozy began his presidency by instructing schools to read Môquet's last letter to his family on October 22, the date of his execution. Sarkozy initially planned to read the letter himself at Môquet's *lycée*, Lycée Carnot, as part of his promotion of citizenship and national identity. Nor did the government stop there. It also released a postage stamp bearing Môquet's likeness and distributed pamphlets on his life across France. Môquet's

communism was overlooked. As Rosbottom notes in his one-paragraph summary of the affair, neither right nor left was happy with Sarkozy's gesture.

From Môquet, Rosbottom travels back in time to describe the France in which young resisters grew up during the 1930s. Rosbottom's discussion of the impact that the era's new mass media and technologies had on the young is nicely done and makes interesting points. Rosbottom notes, for instance, that live radio coverage of the February 1934 political violence and the 1936 assault on Léon Blum brought politics directly into the lives of French young people in new ways. Rosbottom also connects youth leisure practices, especially movie-going, to their resistance, commenting that the first repeated instances of adolescent resistance occurred in cinemas. Young people often disrupted showings of German-made films and newsreels by yelling, hooting, or stomping their feet. The following chapter, oddly titled "What the Hell Happened?", recounts the collapse of France and the *exode*.

The next three chapters, which explore young people's wartime experiences and resistance activism, constitute the heart of the book. Rosbottom narrates young people's resistance stories with a view towards highlighting their dramatic properties. The life and wartime experiences of Jacques Lusseyran, the hero of chapter four, stand out. Relying heavily on Lusseyran's memoir, *And There Was Light*, Rosbottom describes how Lusseyran lost his sight at the age of seven in a school accident. Yet Lusseyran's blindness was not experienced as a disadvantage. The boy eschewed the renowned Institut national des jeunes aveugles in Paris, remaining in "regular" schools, where he excelled. Losing his sight pushed the boy to develop his remaining senses in a way that made him more sensitive to his surroundings than his classmates. When Jacques and his classmates at the celebrated Lycée Louis-le-Grand gathered clandestinely in the spring of 1941 to form a resistance group, they selected Lusseyran as their leader. Lusseyran's main day-to-day responsibility was to interview adolescent boys wanting to join the group. He was able, apparently, to sense when those being interviewed were trying to hide secrets or shade the truth. The group, *Volontaires de la Liberté*, focused on disseminating information, mainly in their two-page, mimeographed publication. Although Lusseyran was ultimately betrayed, arrested, imprisoned, and sent to Buchenwald, he survived the war.

The reader is introduced to other young resisters whose actions were similarly laudable. They include nineteen-year-old, Roger Fichtenberg, who used the cover provided by his Scouting uniform to aid Jewish refugees. Fichtenberg and his fellow Jewish Scouts transported refugees on bicycles, placed them with families, hid them, and even spirited them over the Pyrenees into Spain and over the Alps into Switzerland. We also meet the ten-year-old Jewish boy, Nano, the book's youngest resister, who carried messages by bicycle to the Jewish children his father was trying to assist. As these two examples suggest, the bicycle served as a primary tool of adolescent resistance. Widely available and relatively commonplace, the bicycle allowed adolescent resisters to carry out their work without eliciting suspicion. Other young men put their professional expertise to the use of resistance. The young worker, Adolpho, drew on his training in chemicals and dyes to become "the master forger of northern France" (p. 187).

Young women resisters are mostly relegated to a final chapter, "Does Resistance Have a Gender?" The chapter echoes arguments made by scholars of women since the mid-1980s: that women, especially young women unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, played significant, if gender-specific, roles in the resistance, even if their actions remain less well known than those of their male counterparts. Young women's most important resistance work came in the passing

of information; they were less likely to take up armed resistance than young men. What Rosbottom nicely terms young women's "cultural camouflage" allowed their work to go relatively unsuspected by chauvinistic male police, at least for a while. The heroines in this chapter are the young communist Maroussia Naïtchenko, the historian Annie Kriegel, who was also active within communist networks, and Geneviève de Gaulle, Charles de Gaulle's niece. All three women left autobiographical accounts of their experiences from which Rosbottom draws for his narration. Because Rosbottom started the book with Môquet, it seems a missed opportunity not to have included here the communists' female resistance martyr, Danielle Casanova, who headed the communists' organization for young women, l'Union des Jeunes Filles de France, and who perished in Auschwitz.

The book does not proceed chronologically, with the narrative accounts often looping back on themselves in disconcerting ways. Yet a rough timeline of young people's resistance can be discerned. Young people's wartime resistance was initially characterized by small acts, what Rosbottom terms "soft" resistance, such as refusing to obey laws, printing and distributing propaganda, hooting or shouting at films, or spitting prunes at German soldiers. He frequently makes the point that, early on, young people rarely understood the consequences of their actions, which sometimes come off in these pages more as juvenile pranks than as principled acts. As the war proceeded, developments fundamentally altered the shape of youth resistance. The German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 freed French communists to enter wholeheartedly into anti-German resistance. Communist resistance became better organized and more effective in the aftermath. But it was the Vichy government's decision in 1942 to draft young men for labor in Germany that pushed so many young men to go underground. From there, taking up arms was a smaller step than it had been previously.

Rosbottom moves outward from his personal narratives to explain why young people resisted. Some young people, Rosbottom believes, simply "did not have much choice" (p. 10). Jewish adolescents, undocumented immigrants, and the children of socialists and communists, he writes, had "little option but to act in some way to protect one's family and friends" (p. 10). This seems an odd way to put it, especially since so many young people in those situations did not resist. Even though Rosbottom's young resisters were often communist, ideological commitments play little role in Rosbottom's analysis. Instead, it was a transhistorical adolescent temperament that seemed to push young people to resist and that endowed them with an age-related moral courage, clarity, and energy. "No age group," Rosbottom writes sweepingly, "is more ready to turn their almost innate sense of justice and fair play--no matter how inculcated--into action" (p. 14). This may well be, although historians prefer to anchor attributions of causality in period-specific circumstance.

Sudden Courage is intended for a general American audience that knows little of France's complicated Second World War past. The book gestures occasionally to historiographical debates without engaging them and its scholarly apparatus is slight. Explanatory notes are indicated by asterisks, citations are limited, and the historical scholarship on which Rosbottom is so reliant is not always credited. The language used can be breezy. News "flows like a brisk wind" (p. 8), young conservatives are "bounced around like pinballs" (p. 9), and young Catholics "anxiously waited for the next shoe to drop" (p. 141). Rosbottom is not an historian and he commits the occasional factual error. Anachronistic language also slips in. The term "teenagers" is frequently used to describe young resisters even though "teenager" was not a term used in France until the 1950s. Historians of youth, moreover, would strongly disagree with the

statement, “Today not much is different in the experience of adolescence, despite the striking changes in our world since the 1940s” (p. 15).

Yet the book, which is blurbed by Robert O. Paxton among others, is not without interest for scholars of France, especially those charged with teaching French history to the young. Rosbottom is well-versed in the history of wartime France and the question of why young people resisted in such great numbers resonates in an era when Greta Thunberg’s moral outrage over climate crisis has galvanized adolescents globally and young people have been at the forefront of resistance to China’s clampdown in Hong Kong. Rosbottom tells his story clearly and with a view to engaging readers. The very characteristics that might frustrate academic historians may well attract their students. In the end, the book, already available in a trade paperback, might lead to interesting classroom conversations about the nature of resistance and young people’s relationship to it. It also might stimulate useful discussion about the differences between academic and popular history.

Susan B. Whitney
Carleton University
susanwhitney@cunet.carleton.ca

Copyright © 2020 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 republication 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