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H-France Review Vol. 21 (February 2021), No. 10

Olivier Wieviorka, *The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940-1945*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. xxi + 488 pp. \$38.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0231189965; \$26.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0231189972; \$25.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0231548649.

Review by William I. Hitchcock, University of Virginia.

Did the resistance to German occupation during World War II matter? Of course, the answer is yes—but how much did it matter? What impact did it have upon the course of the war, and upon postwar politics? And how much did it owe to British and American assistance? These questions have provoked debate across the continent since the war itself, when competing claims among resistance movements to the leading position in the anti-fascist cause mapped onto ideological divisions and hampered national unity during the liberation and postwar reconstruction. It was always understood that resistance movements were more than simply an extension of allied military forces. They were also social movements, formed as part of a broad opposition to fascism, barbarism, foreign occupation, in the service of human dignity and freedom. And in that sense, the resistance as a site of politics and memory has mattered to Europeans ever since the end of the war.[1]

But peeling back the myth from the reality—finding the history of the resistance in a swirling tangle of memories, rival ideologies, and national pride—is no easy task. Olivier Wieviorka would seem superbly equipped for the challenge. He is one of the leading scholars of wartime politics in France and has published excellent books on the French resistance as well as the Normandy landings of June 1944.[2] And in this book, Wieviorka widens the lens, covering six western European nations—Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway. Although his previous work is devoted to the French experience, Wieviorka now asserts that historians should transcend national boundaries and “construct a European history of the resistance” (p. 5). Doing so, he hopes, will allow him to capture the crucial significance of the United States and the United Kingdom in shaping, funding, and directing the resistance movements. He also wants to highlight the place of the governments-in-exile that took up residence in London and acted as transmission belts between the great powers and the local networks on the continent. Seeking to chart the entire kaleidoscope of resistance movements in a context of allied grand strategy, he offers what he calls “the first transnational history of the resistance” (p. 6).

The results are rather mixed. Unlike his excellent book on the Normandy landings, which uses chronology to drive the action from a clear starting point in 1942 right through to the drama of the landings all the way to the liberation of France, *The Resistance in Western Europe* never finds a narrative coherence. Because he eschews a national framework, Wieviorka tries to unfold the

story as a sequence running from the German invasion of Scandinavia, the Low Countries and France through to the entry of the USSR and the United States into the war, moving gradually toward D-Day in 1944 and the liberation of Western Europe. At the same time, each of the twenty-one chapters introduces a new theme, so the loose chronological structure often falls away. The author toggles back and forth from country to country, capital to capital, offering nuggets about Belgium or Holland or Norway next to developments in London or Washington. Those without a clear grasp of the course of World War II or western European politics might find it hard to see the forest for all the trees.

The book is strongest in its treatment of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), formed in July 1940 to coordinate sabotage and espionage on the continent. While Prime Minister Winston Churchill had called on SOE to “set Europe ablaze,” the reality proved more prosaic. The organization was beset by bureaucratic wrangling and turf wars, and setting Europe ablaze without weapons, radios or trained fighters turned out to be a naïve hope. Instead, SOE evolved as a key support system for the formation of local resistance groups in Europe, and Wieviorka is attentive to the varied relationships that SOE developed in each nation. The Norwegians, for example, were model allies, working closely with SOE to infiltrate and exfiltrate spies and saboteurs, using the long Norwegian coastline and its proximity to the Shetland Islands with great effectiveness. By contrast, French relations with SOE were strained by the intense jealousy of the Free French leader, General Charles de Gaulle, whose London-based organization sought to assert its own direction of the internal resistance in France. Wieviorka is adept at relating these kinds of institutional struggles in each of the six nations he studies.

It is also refreshing to have so much attention devoted to Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark—four nations with similar problems under German occupation, and where an integrated, comparative approach works to yield fresh perspectives. Leaders like Hubert Pierlot of Belgium, who defied the reprehensible surrender of King Leopold III and formed a government in exile in London, rarely get the attention they deserve in surveys of the resistance. Similarly, King Haakon VII of Norway and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands, who continued to reign from hastily formed seats of power in London, demonstrated a degree of courage and defiance of Hitler that would transform them into rallying points in the struggle against fascism. Inevitably, Wieviorka is strongest on France. The sections of the book that treat de Gaulle and his long but successful effort to assert his primacy over the French resistance show Wieviorka’s mastery of the material.

Wieviorka also sheds new light on the impact of Nazi Germany’s forced labor policy upon the resistance. From 1942 on, the German occupiers combed through the occupied nations in search of workers to toil in the war industries. By summer 1943, five million civilians were working in the Reich’s factories. In the Netherlands, German labor demands provoked nation-wide strikes in spring and summer 1943. In Norway, the resistance fought against forced labor policies but there, the Germans drafted 200,000 Norwegians to work for the occupier inside Norway, thus making it more difficult for the resistance to trigger mass defections. In France, the Vichy-led *Service de Travail Obligatoire* handed over hundreds of thousands of workers to the Germans, as part of the policy of collaboration with the occupiers. French resistance groups in the spring of 1943 tried to turn this humiliating policy to their advantage, generating useful propaganda against Vichy and the Germans, and burnishing their reputation as protectors of the population. Wieviorka shows that while many French civilians sought to shirk or evade these labor roundups, a smaller number fled directly into the arms of the underground resistance.

Yet the book demonstrates surprising weaknesses that hamper its claim to “transnational” history. Most obviously, it omits the enormous and consequential resistance movements in Eastern Europe—no mention is made of the Poles, the various Soviet partisan movements, or Jewish resistance. That can be explained by the quite different circumstances of the occupation in the East, but what about Yugoslavia or Greece, where SOE spent so much time and effort? Should they have been omitted here too? Wieviorka tells us that 38% of all of the arms shipments and material resources SOE sent to Europe went to Yugoslavia—more than any other country. Yet the country’s resistance experience is left out of the book. The Italian scene receives a muddled and superficial treatment. Since Italy came late to the side of the western allies, its resistance story does not fit easily into the other nations covered here, but even so, there is surprisingly little discussion of the extensive Italian partisan activity after September 1943, or its postwar significance in Italian politics. Finally, for such a long book, there is relatively little detail on the military role of the resistance movements. The summer of 1944, when French resistance fighters did play a significant role in providing intelligence about German dispositions to allied forces, or in conducting sabotage, is examined rather briefly.

Yet that may be because like all historians of the resistance in Western Europe, Wieviorka knows that the military impact was chiefly political and moral rather than military. The sabotage of war-related industries was usually ineffective, with a few significant exceptions like the destruction of the German heavy-water plant in Norway, which slowed German progress toward an atomic weapon. Even the radio broadcasts and leafletting into occupied territory did not significantly hamper German military strength. A lack of aircraft, ships, transport, weapons, and technology limited the power of the active resistance against the German behemoth. More significant, then, as Wieviorka demonstrates, was the moral dimension. The resistance allowed Europeans “to become actors in their own history;” they “risked their lives to ensure the triumph of democratic ideals” (p. 387). Theirs is an example that subsequent generations should honor and perhaps even emulate, should democratic governance ever fall prey to the lurking forces of fascism.

## NOTES

[1] Previous surveys include Henri Bernard, *Histoire de la résistance européenne* (Brussels: Marabout, 1968); Jorgen Haestrup, *European Resistance Movements, 1939-1945: A Complete History* (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1981); Jacques Semelin, *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe, 1939-1943*, translated by Suzan Husserl-Kapit (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993); M.R.D. Foot, *Resistance: An Analysis of European Resistance to Nazism 1940-1945* (London: Methuen, 1976); Bob Moore, ed., *Resistance in Western Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000). On SOE, there is David Stafford, *Britain and the European Resistance, 1940-1945: A survey of the Special Operations Executive* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Nigel West, *Secret War: The Story of SOE, Britain's Wartime Sabotage Organization* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992); M.R.D. Foot, *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive 1940-46* (London: Bodley Head, 1984). On governments in exile, see Martin Conway and José Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile: Exile Communities in Britain, 1940-1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2001). Pieter Lagrou has probed the way in which wartime resistance played out in the politics of Western Europe: *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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[2] Olivier Wieviorka, *Normandy: The Landings to the Liberation of Paris*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); and *Histoire de la Résistance: 1940-1945* (Paris: Perrin, 2013).

William I. Hitchcock  
University of Virginia  
[hitch@virginia.edu](mailto:hitch@virginia.edu)

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ISSN 1553-9172