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Rémi Dalisson, *Les soldats de 1940: Une génération sacrifiée*. Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2020. 275 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. €24.00. (pb). ISBN 9782271126108.

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Perhaps no subject in French history has attracted more sustained attention or more controversy than France's traumatic and divisive experience of the Second World War. Eric Conan and Henry Rousso famously dubbed the period of the German occupation and the Vichy regime "a past that does not pass,"^[1] while Olivier Wieviorka sought to explain France's "divided memory" of that period as a result of the "variety of lived experiences" of the wartime years.^[2] Soldiers and civilians, resisters and collaborators, colonial subjects and victims of Allied bombing, as well as those (including Jews and Roma) who had been targeted for extermination by the German occupiers and the Vichy regime jostled for recognition in the postwar public sphere. In seeking to be recognized and to shape perceptions of their roles in the war, groups and individuals have waded through a public discourse defined by ruthless partisan politics and powerful taboos.

In Rémi Dalisson's fascinating new book, he focuses on the maligned and misunderstood soldiers of the French army of 1939–1940, veterans of the *drôle de guerre* and the Battle of France. Dubbing them a "sacrificed generation," Dalisson sets out to identify why they have been marginalized and to begin to restore them to what he sees as their proper place in French memory. To that end, Dalisson productively unites approaches from traditional history of memory with the tools and concerns of the social history of veterans, a subfield with its origins in Antoine Prost's classic 1977 study of the "reintegration into society" of the *anciens combattants* of the First World War.^[3] *Les soldats de 1940* succeeds in demonstrating the strengths of both approaches, as well as their complementarity. By rooting his inquiry in the history of a particular social group, Dalisson avoids the potential for abstraction, generalization, and top-down focus that sometimes characterizes works on cultural memory. By tracing the experiences of the veterans of 1940 and the development of their public image over eighty years of subsequent history, he demonstrates the continuing relevance of their lives to some of France's most urgent political and social questions. The sum of his efforts is an excellent and engaging study of a subject that is long overdue to receive this sort of treatment, and a breath of fresh air for those of who may have begun to wonder what is next for the history of memory.

Dalisson begins with the mobilization of 4.8 million Frenchmen beginning in August 1939. Chapter one traces the development of public attitudes toward the army and its troops through the *drôle de guerre* and the six-week campaign of spring and summer 1940. Relying on a mix of press sources and first-hand accounts, he illustrates how soldiers experienced the months of

preparation and waiting, the rising crescendo of chaos after the German invasion, and finally the collapse of June 1940. He shows that contestation over the army's strengths and weaknesses began before the first shots were fired, despite efforts by the state and much of the press to paint an optimistic picture of the situation at the front. Early interpretations of the troops and their qualities were colored by observers' predispositions, including broadly felt confidence in France's power and security, the political right's skepticism of the republic, the pessimism of certain military leaders, and increasingly forlorn hopes for peace on the part of both soldiers and civilians.

At the heart of this chapter is a question that forms one of the main unifying threads of the book—put crudely, how brave were the soldiers of 1940? Dalisson responds to this question by citing the tenacity and heroism with which the army resisted despite its increasingly hopeless strategic situation. He draws attention to the heavy losses they suffered, comparable in scale to the losses suffered by French troops in the first six months of the First World War. In spite of their efforts and their sacrifices, the precipitousness of the collapse led to the emergence of the persistent idea that the men of 1940 either lacked courage or were betrayed by a fifth column.

Chapter two addresses the over 1.85 million Frenchmen who became prisoners of war in 1940. Dalisson begins by tracing their journeys from hastily assembled *Frontstalags* to the *Stalags* (for ordinary troops) and the more comfortable *Oflags* (for officers) where they lingered, some until the end of the war. His account emphasizes the diversity of their experiences, one that he credits with foreclosing the possibility of a unified memory of captivity. Some did forced labor in the camps or on work details in German villages and towns. Some gained formal liberation from their prisoner-of-war status by offering to work for the German war effort, thereby joining the ranks of voluntary collaborators. Some tried to escape, and fewer succeeded. Colonial troops from North and sub-Saharan Africa were subjected to harsh treatment in segregated camps on French soil, while Alsatians, considered to be Germans by blood, were often released early.

Contrary to the diversity of lived experiences of captivity, Vichy presented a homogenized vision of the prisoners of war as “*victimes-héros providentiels*” (p. 35). Propaganda emphasized the captives' patriotic sacrifice and the state's efforts at securing their release, thereby creating a perceived alignment between the prisoners of war and the Vichy regime which did not reflect the diverse political views of the soldiers themselves. Yet their central symbolic role in Vichyite propaganda has led to ongoing public distrust of a group tainted by its association with collaboration.

In chapter three the focus shifts to the return home to France. As the Allied forces advanced into Germany, French prisoners of war were liberated individually and in groups. Their mental and physical distance from France during the occupation meant that returnees “discovered a new France” whose social and political workings were no longer familiar and whose population no longer seemed to know them (p. 72). Dalisson claims that most soldiers wanted to return to their prewar lives as quickly as possible, and that desire contributed to silences around the defeat and the experience of captivity. *Revenants* faced a mixed reception from neighbors and family members due to their long absence, their symbolic association with Pétainism, and their reputation for cowardice. While many of those with whom they were reunited were happy to see them, they also encountered children who no longer knew them and spouses that had grown distant.

Meanwhile, the new provisional government struggled to cope with the huge volume of returnees. Here we see the beginning of a trend in which hastily developed administrative structures and clumsily defined administrative categories had an outsized impact on the ex-prisoners of war. Veterans were initially lumped in with deportees and refugees for administrative purposes, a choice that subsumed them symbolically into the broad category of *absents*. This administrative erasure fed into the widespread perception of the ex-prisoners as fervent Pétainists who had lived comfortably in Germany while the occupied French suffered. The result was what Dalisson calls a “*dépossession symbolique*,” the exclusion of the soldiers of 1940 from the *France combattante* of memory (p. 95).

Chapter four addresses the immediate postwar years. Dalisson identifies the soldiers of 1940 as victims of a “*hold-up mémoriel*,” by which they were displaced from popular memory by the more attractive figure of the Resistance (p. 100). Escapees and those who had tried to escape had the opportunity to be recognized as being akin to *résistants*, while those who had not attempted to escape did not. Faced by the hegemony of resistancialism, ex-prisoners of war formed organizations to advocate for their shared interests. These were generally organized by *Stalag* rather than by unit, reflecting the experience of men that had spent most of the war in captivity. Despite their efforts, the early postwar years saw the continued conflation of ex-prisoners with other categories of *absents*, notably the volunteers who had traveled to Germany as part of the *Service de travail obligatoire* (STO), contributing to continued popular misunderstandings regarding the wartime role of the soldiers of 1940.

Chapter five focuses on the period of the *Trente glorieuses*. Dalisson skillfully analyzes the role of mass media, including film, popular music, and radio, in shaping the image of the veterans of 1940 during that period, as well as the impact of the rise of the baby boom generation. The resurgence of Gaullism led to an explosion of official and unofficial commemoration of the “Army of Shadows,” as Resistance memory continued to overshadow memory of the *drôle de guerre* and the Battle of France. While the period around May 1968 saw serious challenges to the Gaullist resistancialist myth, that did not benefit the men of 1940 much. If anything, the publication of Paxton’s *La France de Vichy* in 1972 further underlined the depth of Vichyite feeling in wartime France.[4] Popular films such as “*Mais où donc est passé le septième compagnie?*” (1973) portrayed them as incompetent, cowardly, and living in comfort in German camps. With few exceptions, French mass media assigned the soldiers of 1940 an inferior place in the national narrative of the war well into the 1980s.

Chapter six addresses the early twenty-first century, a period Dalisson identifies as the turning point for the reputation of the soldiers of 1940. In the 1980s and 1990s, the rise of global and transnational approaches and the emergence of memory studies led scholars to revisit the Second World War with new tools. Around the same time, the Barbie, Touvier and Papon trials set off heightened “memory wars” over the meanings of the 1940-1945 period. Those developments helped to make both scholarly and public reevaluation of the army of 1940 possible. Yet Dalisson admits that the “*persistance des stéréotypes montre que le traumatisme de la défaite et de l'emprisonnement reste un syndrome difficilement guérissable à l'aube du quatre-vingtième anniversaire de la campagne de France*” (p. 183).

Dalisson emphasizes the role of “history from below” in shifting popular perceptions of the generation of 1940. Along with the opening of relevant archives, he credits this scholarly approach with giving voice to the variety of experiences of the war and undermining stubborn

national myths. The creation of online databases of soldiers' testimonies, especially since the Sarkozy era, has allowed scholars and non-scholars alike to read about the experiences of the men of 1940 in their own words. The same period saw the creation of new memorial institutions such as the *Mémorial de la Shoah* in Paris in 2005, and renewed interest in the experience of France's colonial troops following the release of Rachid Bouchareb's film *Indigènes* in 2006.

Dalisson pays special attention to the rising popularity of "histotainment." New forms of entertainment media on historical themes have had mixed consequences for popular memory, due in part to the danger of decontextualization and trivialization. However, he uses Jacques Tardi's graphic novel *Moi, René Tardi, prisonnier de guerre au Stalag II-B* (2012; 2018) as an example of the possibilities inherent in the medium, lauding its "history from below" approach and detailed illustrations painstakingly reconstructing life in the titular prisoner of war camp. Finally, he shifts his focus to considering French memory of 1940 in global perspective, offering a thoughtful comparison with recent memory controversies over Japan's 1931 and 1937 invasions of China.

Dalisson's conclusion insists that while progress has been made, the disaster of 1940 still casts a shadow over French society. He concludes by restating the importance of restoring the men of 1940 to their proper place both in history and in memory while recognizing the complexity and diversity of those men their experiences. As Dalisson writes, "car si le pays veut continuer à faire nation, s'il veut comprendre d'où il vient..." (p. 230).

A major strength of *Les soldats de 1940* is its success at synthesizing numerous sources and addressing a dizzying variety of *lieux de mémoire* and memorial practices. Dalisson brings together accounts of changes in state policy, scholarly trends, and trends in popular culture over the eighty years since the German invasion, giving a reasonably comprehensive account of the legacy of his subjects, broadly conceived. While he addresses the construction of monuments, the creation of state memorial institutions, and the awarding (often belated) of medals, he also gives space to the initiatives undertaken by private groups and associations and changing representations of the soldiers of 1940 in *bandes dessinées*, novels, film, and television. The impact of new media, websites, and video games is also addressed.

Further scholarship might do well to consider how the experience of the soldiers of 1940 fits into a longer story of the fraught place of the army in French society, including often-tense relations between the generally right-wing officer corps and the Republic it serves. After all, 1940 was neither the first nor the last time that contempt and distrust between soldiers and civilians has had serious consequences for French society.

In the context of the resurgence of the far right and efforts at flattening out France's history to suit a narrow nationalist framework, remembering the soldiers of 1940 as they were, both triumphant and tragic, seems especially urgent today. This book has the potential to appeal broadly to scholars and students of the history of the world wars, as well as those interested in both the history of memory and the history of the veteran's experience. It also has the potential to be read beyond the academy, as a thoughtful companion volume to contextualize the recent wave of new "histotainment" dealing with the wartime years. In dealing with the story of a group of veterans that have been maligned, mocked, and ignored, Dalisson's study provides a template for how scholars might reconsider the legacies of other groups—notably the veterans of France's wars of decolonization and the US war in Vietnam.

NOTES

[1] Eric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: un passé qui ne passe pas* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

[2] Wieviorka, *Divided Memory: French Recollections of World War II from the Liberation to the Present* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 5.

[3] Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française: 1914-1939* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977).

[4] Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

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