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Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Assassination in Vichy: Marx Dormoy and the Struggle for the Soul of France*. University of Toronto Press, 2020. xiv and 312 pp. Note on sources, figures, glossary of names, organizations, timeline, notes, suggested reading, bibliography, and index. \$56.25 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781487588373; \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781487588366; \$22.95 U.S. (eb). Digital file.

Review by Mattie Fitch, Marymount University.

The research and writing pair Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite have a knack for finding compelling stories that are historically revealing. With their new book, *Assassination in Vichy: Marx Dormoy and the Struggle for the Soul of France*, they again present a case study of a murder perpetrated by right-wing terrorists. As with their first book, they blend readability with intellectual rigor. *Assassination in Vichy* elaborates many of the arguments that the duo made in *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France*.<sup>[1]</sup> The new work details the activities of Cagoule members after the group was dismantled in the late 1930s and traces relevant themes from the preceding work into the era of Vichy and collaboration. The authors make extensive use of police records, newspapers, and diaries to expand our picture of the Cagoule and its wartime reincarnations, an authoritarian, reactionary, and violent group bent on destroying enemies who would sully or hinder the advent of their ideal French nation.

Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite examine the gruesome and carefully planned assassination in 1941 by former Cagoulards of Marx Dormoy, the Popular Front interior minister and socialist who was instrumental in bringing down the extremist organization in 1937. Given the dearth of works in English about French socialists active in the 1930s (except for socialist leader Léon Blum), this is a welcome contribution. The historians use the murder as a lens through which to investigate the political landscape of wartime France, riven by struggles between and among political groups on the left and the right with different views about what constituted French patriotism.<sup>[2]</sup> The book starts with the assassination, laying out the event and the players, and then narrates, in engaging prose, the vicissitudes of the murder investigation. The analysis is meticulously contextualized to demonstrate how the changing fortunes of the war and occupation shaped decisions and actions. The narrative gets somewhat bogged down in the blow-by-blow account of police interrogations and scheming by the alleged killers (what the authors call the “jousting” between the suspects and the investigators) (p. 175). The book could likely have been even shorter than its already very reasonable 200-odd pages of text. Given its length, advanced students could access this work. It is a compelling “whodunnit” that will engage their interest and is valuable pedagogically both for its content and method. The authors explain the historical

context simply, thoroughly, and clearly, and they make explicit use of police records, demonstrating how archival material is created, analyzed, and mustered for an argument.

Detailing the police search for those responsible for Dormoy's death, the historians trace the links between the assassins and political figures among Vichy officials, other collaborators, and German occupiers. They reveal a web of complicity by following the driving question for investigators: who among Vichy and its entourage funded and authorized Dormoy's murder, and why? Starting with the disgruntled and fanatical youth who carried out the assassination, the authors explain how the murder aligned with the future the assassins believed they were creating. Responsibility for the terrorist act, however, also lay with their political patrons and financiers within Vichy, who planned the assassination, and with the Nazi officials who ensured that the assassins did not pay for their crimes. In an arresting line, they write that Dormoy "was murdered by the whole collaborationist establishment" (p. 220). The book reveals yet again the participation of Vichy in political murder and the Holocaust, as well as the powerful individuals within French society who were implicated in Vichy's crimes, such as Eugène Schueller, the creator of L'Oréal, who funded violent rightwing groups.

Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite also pursue a related question, the most intriguing of the book: why was the investigation allowed to proceed so long and why was it ultimately quashed? They explain the complications posed by Dormoy's murder for Vichy leaders, torn as they were between competing impulses. On the one hand, they emphasized the continuities of French sovereignty and thus needed to maintain at least the appearance of the rule of law. On the other, they were increasingly beholden to the German occupiers, who favored the public elimination of the previous political establishment.

According to Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite, Dormoy and his murder have not received the attention they deserve from historians or the public. Although Dormoy and his allies on the left, such as Blum, treated the Cagoule as a very real danger to the Republic, many influential people in France denied the existence of domestic French terrorists. Historians have generally followed their lead in dismissing the impact of the Cagoule. Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite insist instead on the threat to French democracy posed by the Cagoule in particular and the radical right more broadly, aligning with Chris Millington and other recent scholars.<sup>[3]</sup> The authors argue that the group used violence to disrupt civil society and communicate the message that the Third Republic was weak and divisive, helping to undermine confidence in democratic institutions. As they demonstrate, the power of terrorism lies not in the physical destruction it produces, but in the impact an attack has on politics. Although Dormoy dismantled the Cagoule, with the defeat of France in 1940 and the establishment of the Vichy state under Pétain, the extremists' moment had arrived. The Cagoule was reincarnated into several groups and bureaucracies aligned with Vichy and other collaborators, receiving funding and patronage from high-ranking individuals. Far from a parenthesis or aberration in French history, Vichy and its collaborationist allies grew out of the politics and even the organizations of the 1930s.

After the war, the French prioritized rebuilding their economy and society rather than pursuing wartime criminals. As Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite explain, they valued reconciliation over justice and promoted unity through forgetting. A useful contrast to Dormoy's resulting obscurity is the recent Pantheonization of Jean Zay, who had been similarly forgotten and was also murdered during the war years for his republican views (and in Zay's case, because of his Jewish background). Unlike Zay's, Dormoy's murder hinged on his opposition to the right during the

Popular Front years and the threat he continued to pose to the new order because of what he could reveal. He “remains a symbol of France’s divisions during a terrible period in French history” and confronting his death meant facing “France’s failure of judgment” (p. 9; p. 222). Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite hope to elevate Dormoy as an important figure of the Third Republic and one of the few who fought against its demise.

Styling Dormoy “France’s first resister and martyr of the war,” the authors grant him hero status for taking an ethical and political stance that cost him his life (p. 5). As with any “first” argument, one can always think of other contenders, but this point is relatively unimportant to their analysis. Recognizing Dormoy as a resister *avant la lettre* is more central and clearly makes sense, given the continuity of the Cagoule of the 1930s with a new group of the war years, the Mouvement social révolutionnaire (MSR). Dormoy’s courage and devotion to republican ideals are admirable and deserving of recognition, especially as these traits were shamefully rare in 1940. One does wonder at times if the reverential language distracts from the analysis (the reference to France’s “soul” in the title seems especially hyperbolic). For example, the Armistice with the Germans was hardly “foisted on France,” given the support among many French people in 1940 for Pétain and the end of hostilities (p. 8). Though Dormoy’s actions in defense of the Republic might align with our sympathies as historians, they did not align with those of the majority at the time. Vichy was undoubtedly a non-democratic and authoritarian state, but Pétain’s special powers were approved by the vote of the legitimate representatives of the people. Furthermore, Sarah Farmer explains that the use of the term “martyr” was not used innocently in the postwar context, but rather served the very agenda of political amnesia that the authors criticize.[4] Their uncritical reliance on this concept is one weak spot in an otherwise well-argued work.

While many of its conclusions are not new, the book illuminates key themes within the historiography of Vichy. Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite contribute to the study of gender and fascism, the nature of the French right and the Vichy state, postwar justice, and national memory. Relying on a large body of work about the relationship between gender and politics in the 1930s and 1940s, the authors explain how the assassins fashioned their identities in the context of changing ideas about gender.[5] A gender analysis of the killers’ actions and beliefs facilitates our understanding of their purpose and is far more compelling than an attempt to decipher the criminals’ psychological motivations would have been.

This study of extreme rightwing violence through one high-profile murder adds to our picture of the multifaceted French right during the war years.[6] On the one hand, the outcome of the investigation into Dormoy’s assassination was determined by interactions among multiple competing rightwing authorities in wartime France: activists on the ground, leaders of organizations, the Vichy state, and the German occupiers. As this indicates, Vichy lacked control over many elements of French government and society and tried to shape events to the best of their limited ability. On the other, the book spells out connections among diverse historical actors. It reveals the ties between future collaborators and Nazis in the 1930s and the close links between Francoist Spain and the French right. As recent scholarship has increasingly shown and the book demonstrates, significant continuity existed among the Third Republic, Vichy, and the post-Liberation state.[7] Some of the state apparatus and its personnel continued to function without much change, especially in the justice system and the police force. Pétain, the authors remind us, was a member of the Third Republic, which complicated attempts to place blame for the defeat in 1940 on the prewar democracy. There was ideological continuity, too, particularly

in the anti-Communist motivations of Vichy supporters and the Cold War fight against communism. Of course, there were differences as well, the most important and obvious being the prosecution of Cagouards by Dormoy under the Third Republic and the promotion of them by Vichy. The book provides a reminder that none of these institutions was a monolith, riven as they were by competing forces.

Opposing ideas of justice divided different players in wartime and postwar France, especially those embraced by the extreme right, left-wing figures such as Dormoy, supporters of Vichy, and members of the resistance.[8] The unpacking of the workings of the justice system during Vichy is one of the strengths of the book. Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite illuminate the criminality unleashed by the fall of the Republic, of which Dormoy's murder is just one example. Under Vichy, justice operated based on political expediency, rather than rule of law. For example, one of the most violent members of the Cagoule and the MSR, Jean Filliol, acted with impunity under Vichy despite outstanding warrants for his arrest issued under Dormoy's purview. However, Vichy leader Pierre Laval eventually ordered his arrest when his actions became too destabilizing. Officials' desire to pursue or protect individuals based on political considerations, in this case Dormoy's assassins, was complicated by judges who took seriously the impartiality they believed was required of their role. Pressure from the German occupiers added an additional layer of difficulty.

By contrast, the principal investigating officer, Charles Chenevier, pursued justice based on the rule of law during Vichy as an act of resistance. Despite the authors' focus on Dormoy, Chenevier seems to be the real hero of the book. Ultimately, however, he failed to bring Dormoy's killers to justice. Even after the fall of Vichy, this remained true. As Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite demonstrate, achieving justice after the war was particularly problematic because the state itself was guilty. Furthermore, "the needs of the future...clashed with the demands of the past for justice" (p. 202).

As the authors argue, "Dormoy's murder by rightwing extremists devoted to Pétain and Nazi collaboration was at odds with a national memory that minimized French devotion to Vichy and assimilated Resistance into the nation as a whole" (p. 208). Contrary to this national myth, the line between choosing Vichy or the Resistance was very thin, a point that is one of the key contributions of the book.[9] Two founding members of the Cagoule who organized Dormoy's assassination, Gabriel Jeantet and Eugène Deloncle, made different choices about what it meant to be a "loyal, patriotic Frenchman" during the war years: Jeantet joined the resistance, while Deloncle collaborated closely with the Nazis (p. 187). Resistance in France lacked a central ideological foundation. Both Jeantet and Chenevier initially supported Vichy but soon joined the resistance, although Chenevier was pursuing Jeantet for orchestrating Dormoy's killing.

One can find many parallels between these turbulent years of France's history, defined by political polarization and the rise of rightwing extremism, and the contemporary period. The term "fake news" even makes an appearance in the book (p. 25). With Dormoy's demise as an example, the authors indict the political and media establishment for fearing the threat of violence from the extreme left more than from the extreme right. Not only has this allowed violent groups on the extreme right to operate, but authorities have even facilitated them through financing, lenient sentencing, or providing information, as was the case in 1941. However, this is perhaps a position we can only take with hindsight. In the 1930s, memories persisted of real leftwing violence. Several decades before, anarchists had assassinated a series of leading political figures.

It had only recently become apparent that the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia would not trigger a worldwide communist revolution. Socialist revolutions in Germany following the First World War, for example, made this seem distinctly possible. Nevertheless, Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite issue a warning for today's society that resonates without feeling heavy-handed or anachronous (and after the January 6 insurrection in the U.S. Capitol seems especially prescient).

## NOTES

[1] Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Metro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

[2] Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-39* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[3] Chris Millington, *Fighting for France: Violence in Interwar French Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[4] Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

[5] See, among others, Caroline Campbell, *Political Belief in France, 1927-1945: Gender, Empire, and Fascism in the Croix de feu and Parti social français* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2015) and Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[6] Samuel Kalman and Sean Kennedy, eds., *The French Right between the Wars: Political and Intellectual Movements from Conservatism to Fascism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

[7] Philip Nord, *France's New Deal from the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[8] Megan Koreman, *The Expectation of Justice: France, 1944-1946* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[9] Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Mattie Fitch  
Marymount University  
[mfitch@marymount.edu](mailto:mfitch@marymount.edu)

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