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Jacques Sémelin, *The Survival of the Jews in France, 1940-44*, transl. by Cynthia Schoch and Natasha Lehrer. London: Hurst & Co, 2018. xxiv + 356 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £30.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9781787380141.

Review by Laurien Vastenhout, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

Jacques Sémelin's *The Survival of the Jews in France, 1940-44*, published in 2018, is a shortened, revised and updated version of *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée: comment 75% des Juifs en France ont échappé à la mort*—a book that was both praised and criticised by prominent historians of Vichy France.<sup>[1]</sup> While Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Serge Klarsfeld, for example, considered the work indispensable and a standard reading in historiography on Vichy France, Robert Paxton and Vicki Caron were more critical of Sémelin's conclusions.<sup>[2]</sup> Scholars' active involvement with this monograph can in part be explained by the controversial question that stands at its heart: how is it possible that 75 percent of the Jews in France managed to survive in a country that is known for its increase in antisemitic attitudes from the end of the nineteenth century and which was administered by a collaborationist Vichy regime during Nazi occupation?<sup>[3]</sup> The assumption inherent in this question, namely that certain conditions in France enabled an unexpectedly high survival rate, has been disputed. Given the opportunities Jews had to survive in France, Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton argued, the question should not be why so many survived; instead, we should wonder why so many Jews died.<sup>[4]</sup>

The fact that 75 percent of the Jews in France managed to survive in a country that was reputedly the most antisemitic in Western Europe, has been referred to as the “French paradox.” This French paradox is in fact the direct opposite of the “Dutch paradox.” In the Netherlands, a country that was perceived as tolerant vis-à-vis minorities, a devastating 75 percent of the Jews were deported during the German occupation. For decades, scholars have attempted to understand and explain the substantial differences in deportation rates in Western Europe, aiming, above all, to account for the considerable difference between the Netherlands and France in this regard. Among the numerous explanations that have been put forward are the variations in geographical conditions (densely populated versus vast rural areas), the nature of the occupation (civil administration versus military administration), the power of the SS, and (the lack of) organised resistance activities early on. The attitude of local (non-Jewish) populations has also been considered in various national studies, yet these findings have rarely been understood in a wider, comparative, (western) European framework.<sup>[5]</sup> Sémelin bridges this gap and seems to contend that the assistance provided by ordinary non-Jews in France to their Jewish neighbours is another explanatory factor that should be addressed in this context. The concept of “social reactivity,” which entailed “miniature acts of solidarity” or small gestures of support by

the French population, is central to his argument (p. 251-253).<sup>[6]</sup> In Sémelin's view, these gestures, no matter how small, were crucial to the survival of Jews in France.

Although Sémelin does not explicitly say so, this would mean that citizens of the Netherlands, or those of Belgium and Norway, provided (significantly) less aid to Jews in their respective countries. Public opinion in France was not as antisemitic as scholars have claimed, the author argues. "If the French were so antisemitic, then why was there not a manifestation of support for Vichy in either the occupied or the unoccupied zone?" (p. 198-199). This question can also be reversed. If public opinion towards Jews was indeed generally sympathetic, then why did the French not engage in a major protest against a regime that was so outspokenly antisemitic, and which actively facilitated the persecution of Jews in France, including those with French nationality? From a comparative viewpoint, this question is particularly interesting, as the only major organised protest against German policies, and the persecution of the Jews, took place in the country with the highest deportation rate in western Europe: the Netherlands (the *Februaristaking* in February 1941, followed by another strike in April/May 1943). Moreover, gestures of support and expressions of sympathy after the introduction of the yellow star, which the author identifies as examples of social reactivity, prevailed in the Netherlands and Belgium as well. This begs the question whether public opinion—which, as Sémelin himself points out, is difficult to research—should indeed be considered as another important explanatory factor for the different deportation rates of Jews in Western Europe.

The concerns that have been raised by Paxton and others regarding this work, including the positive image that Sémelin portrays of French public opinion, minimising the pervasiveness of antisemitism in France, are well-founded. As has rightly been pointed out, there is a vast body of recent literature that shows that antisemitic legislation grew out of initiatives that already prevailed in the 1930s.<sup>[7]</sup> Therefore, public opinion and Vichy legislation were not as disconnected from one another as the author seems to contend. Moreover, unlike previous scholarship, Sémelin believes that the outrage with which many French citizens responded to the mass arrests of Jews in summer 1942 should be seen as the culmination of the generally sympathetic view that had prevailed among the population in the previous two years. As Paxton has noted, the nature of the evidence that is used to support this claim (testimonies of Jews who had a positive experience, and who survived the war), is not altogether convincing.<sup>[8]</sup> These individuals' stories are not representative of the general experiences of Jews in France.

Apart from the role of "ordinary French citizens" during the Second World War, the book also covers a wide range of other issues that deserve attention. For example, Sémelin carefully demonstrates how Jewish lives were affected by the German occupation in different ways, and how Jews engaged in numerous survival strategies in order to maintain their families, their livelihoods, and their position in a society in which conditions were continuously deteriorating. The author highlights the differences in experiences, not only between French and immigrant Jewry, but also between different generations, and between members of the same family, or even the same household.

Moreover, the book invites the reader to critically engage with complex questions and issues. For example, what does "resistance" entail? The historiography on (Jewish) resistance is rich and has evolved over the past decades. While "resistance" initially exclusively referred to armed resistance activities, the term has come to include a much wider range of acts that were intended to obstruct the intentions of the Nazi regime. Yehuda Bauer asserted that Jews' engagement in

mutual help, education and attempts to preserve health and moral spirit should all be considered acts of resistance.[9] Sémelin's understanding of the term can both be considered a product of this historiographical development, while he also provides a new approach to the term. The author considers the maintenance of Jewish religious life as an act of resistance on the part of the Jews and asserts that marriage and giving birth should be considered as such as well. At the same time, he argues that, in the context of the actions of non-Jews, the concept has become too broad. Therefore, Sémelin makes a distinction between, on the one hand, small (spontaneous and uncoordinated) gestures of support (which he calls 'social reactivity') and, on the other hand, resistance. Unlike social reactivity, he considers resistance to be both intentional and organised.

*The Survival of the Jews in France* is a thought-provoking and controversial work that addresses a wide range of themes that are central to the history of Vichy France, and which simultaneously covers the experiences of Jews in this country during the Second World War. The work deals with a wide range of primary sources, including postwar testimonies and diaries, from French Jews as well as foreign and stateless Jews who resided in France. We can raise objections regarding some of the important conclusions in this work, yet it stimulates critical thinking on themes that have been predominant in existing historiography. The discussions that ensued this publication are of interest to students and scholars working in the fields of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Vichy France.

#### NOTES

[1] Jacques Sémelin, *Persécutions et entraides dans la France occupée: comment 75% des Juifs en France ont échappé à la mort* (Paris: Le Seuil-Les Arènes, 2013).

[2] Robert O. Paxton, "Jews: How Vichy Made it Worse," *The New York Review*, 6 March 2014. Vicki Caron voiced her criticisms of Sémelin's conclusions in response to the English edition in her review of the book, Vicki Caron, "The Survival of the Jews in France, 1940-44," *The Journal of Modern History*, 92:2 (2020): 444-447.

[3] It should be noted that the title of the English edition, unlike the French edition, does not explicitly refer to this question. Despite this difference, the question of why 75 percent of the Jews survived in France is equally central to both works.

[4] Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy et les Juifs* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2015), 13.

[5] See, for example, Serge Klarsfeld, *Le Calendrier de la persécution des juifs en France, 1940-1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1993); Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz. La "solution finale" de la question juive en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1983); Pierre Laborie, *L'Opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990); Bart van der Boom, "*Wij weten niets van hun lot*": gewone Nederlanders en de Holocaust (Amsterdam: Boom, 2012); Remco Ensel en Evelien Gans, "Nivellering in de geschiedenis: Wij weten iets van hun lot," *De Groene Amsterdammer* 50 (12 December 2012).

[6] Sémelin reflected on various forms of unarmed opposition against the Nazis in his earlier work *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe, 1939-1943* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 1993), yet he nuances his earlier statements in *The Survival of the Jews in France*, differentiating between "resistance" and "social reactivity."

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[7] See Caron's book review of *The Jews in France* in *Journal of Modern History* (2020).

[8] See Paxton, "How Vichy Made it Worse."

[9] Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 120; Bauer, "Jewish Resistance in the Ukraine and Belarus during the Holocaust," in Patrick Henry, ed., *Jewish resistance against the Nazis* (Washington: D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 483.

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