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Emmanuel Taïeb, *Hiding the Guillotine: Public Executions in France, 1870-1939*, translated by Sarah-Louise Raillard. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020. xix + 312 pp. Notes, tables, graphs, figures, index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb) ISBN 9781501750946; \$32.99 U.S. (eb) ISBN 9781501750953.

Review by Elizabeth Propes, Tennessee Technological University.

On numerous occasions before the First World War, French legislators considered bills that would bring an end to the public setting for executions. It was not until 1939, however, that a state decree, folded among a series of laws addressing issues such as benefits for family and the work week, rather than a legislative ban, brought the practice to a halt. The death penalty would thereafter be held in private behind prison walls, with only select individuals allowed to witness, and thus testify to the state's enforcement of its laws and fulfillment of its duties to the citizenry. Taïeb seeks to answer the basic question of why, when the government had no intention of eliminating the death penalty, and indeed, did not do so until 1981, leaders decreed that executions would withdraw or be hidden from the public eye in 1939. *Hiding the Guillotine* is not an exploration of debates over the death penalty as a form of punishment, but focuses instead on this public nature of executions, defined by Taïeb as "executionary publicity" (p. 1). Two executions, one in 1870 and the other in 1939, provide the framework for his study, and Taïeb draws on points of comparison to the United States, Britain, Nazi Germany, and France's own history during the *ancien régime* and the nineteenth century for context.

Readers interested in the immediate context of the ban, and why it finally came in 1939 as opposed to some other moment, will be disappointed. Taïeb is less interested in the specific details of this event, noting simply that while some newspapers celebrated the decision, the 1939 decree otherwise drew little attention. If a lack of popular interest served as the final piece in encouraging leaders to end public executions, then more needs to be explained, but this kind of firmly grounded discussion is for another book and not Taïeb's purpose. Yet, in such an interpretation, it remains unclear as to why the government acted in 1939 when it had been so reticent to do so in the past, and this information would help to clarify the relative roles of the topics Taïeb explores throughout the book. For Taïeb, the final public execution and the ban are a means to frame his study and rather than topics that need direct study. The ban, therefore, comes more as a gradual withering away of the state's commitment to putting citizens to death in a public setting, or as Taïeb at times suggests, a final and very quiet sigh of relief by a government that had long wished to end executionary publicity. Over the course of the Third Republic, executions moved from central locations within a town to increasingly less accessible and more hidden sites, and to more inconvenient times of day, so that the public had to work

harder to be able to watch. Just who wanted less visible executions (local authorities or the state) and why (too disruptive to local business, crowd control, or growing revulsion over the blood and gore) shifts in occasionally contradictory ways in the book.

Taïeb invites readers to think about the nature of state-sanctioned violence and the changes in society occurring in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that, in some countries led to the end of the death penalty, but in France and elsewhere simply transformed executions from a popular event to an act secreted away inside prisons. Taïeb offers an intriguing range of issues to consider. Physical space as an actor; urbanization; the increasing use of prison as a form of punishment; and changing definitions of what constitutes civilized behavior are all here in some fashion. Taïeb also considers ritual and spectacle, though he sees them as distinct, with spectacle replacing ritual rather than seeing the ways in which ritual was spectacle, and spectacle included ritual. Through all of these issues, the nineteenth-century rise of the crowd and the related fear and disdain of the masses play a consistent role. Fear of crowds in the early decades of the Third Republic offered one motivation for central and local authorities to remove executions to less accessible locations, as was increasing dismay over the crowd's thrill at seeing a person put to death. Simultaneously, horror and deep dismay came to replace titillation for some viewers, an experience only heightened by the death tolls of the First World War. Taïeb connects the shift to revulsion with urbanization and its literal cleaning up of filth and foul smell, and the "civilizing" process" and increasing refinement of society.[1] Readers interested in sentiment and the history of emotion will find Taïeb's discussion of this topic well worth the effort of reading.

The 1939 ban presumably represented the culmination of these topics, but that would position them as a more tangible and coherent set of influences than the book describes. All of these factors had been at play over the previous decades, but none can truly be described as forces, developments, or even a process. Such terms suggest something far more intentional or structured than Taïeb relates. There are few benchmarks or moments that can serve as a framework for how the government finally reached its decision to act. Taïeb describes a general unease, an increasing distaste among the central state authority and local leaders for having to complete an execution, though the central authority and the periphery never successfully synced up this apparently mutual displeasure in order to end the practice. This distaste was not due to an increasing moral objection toward the death penalty. Instead, public executions became inconvenient, but not so inconvenient as to bring them to a halt sooner.

Taïeb's work is a useful way of thinking about these issues, and in that vein, is a welcome addition for scholars who may find individual chapters more relevant to their interests than the full book. Unfortunately, the decision to include an index of names rather than a subject index makes a targeted exploration of the book impossible. The centralized French State lies at the core of the book, and Taïeb work contributes much to this issue. As the Third Republic became more confident, and in Taïeb's eyes more stable, the 1939 decree reflected the state's belief that it no longer needed the public spectacle to prove to citizens that the government could enforce order, though ironically, as executions became less visible, the public began to doubt whether the executions had actually occurred. Simultaneously, growing tension between the state and the press over who held sway over the minds and hearts of citizens became another factor in ending executionary publicity. The expansion of state bureaucracy and civil service is evident in the particularly compelling discussion of the transformation of the executioner into a civil service worker who was underfunded and underappreciated. As the process became more bureaucratized,

it also became more logistically difficult and wrapped up in red tape, which in turn converted public executions into an unwelcome hassle.

The most significant and consistent theme in the book focuses on the press as a simple reflection of state and society, and also as an influential actor in its own right. Rather than a coherent force, the press is an uncertain actor trying to determine whether it is a mirror of what was happening in society, or an active force that can shape society and government. Executionary publicity played a key part in resolved this uncertainty, Taïeb explains, even as the newspapers became less and less interested in covering the executions. Taïeb also briefly mentions the role that other forms of media, primarily film, and increased though unspecified leisure activity may have played in luring the public to spend its time in ways other than watching an execution, while also sating their thirst for violence and intense emotional experiences. The guillotine became simultaneously less engaging and too disgusting for a movie-viewing public.

A challenging read at times, *Hiding the Guillotine* offers a thought-provoking discussion that should draw readers with a wide range of interests, from the nature of the Third Republic to more focused topics about society and public behavior. His larger interest in state-sanctioned violence is useful for scholars of not only in Francophone studies, but all of the social sciences and advocates interested in reforming legal punishment in the twenty-first century. Scholars who are interested in the banality of evil and the often-alarming indifference that bureaucracy developed in the twentieth century would also find this work relevant.

## NOTES

[1] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (orig. pub. 1939; Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

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