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H-France Review Vol. 22 (February 2022), No. 26

Colin Foss, *The Culture of War: Literature of the Siege of Paris 1870-1871*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. vii + 236 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$130.00 U.S./£90.00 U.K. (hb) ISBN 9781789621921; £90.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 9781789627718.

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Prolonged confinement, curfews, deserted city streets, empty public buildings. Dwindling supplies of basic necessities. Fears of being surround by a deadly enemy. Boredom and isolation. The obsessive consumption of news. Uncertainty about when such exceptional circumstances might ever end. Readers remembering the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the winter and spring of 2020 might recall all too well a similar set of conditions. In this case, however, they describe not our contemporary moment and the threat of a lethal virus but rather a historical state of war: the 1870-71 Siege of Paris, which is the subject of Colin Foss's excellent book. [1] In a beautifully written study, Foss examines how eyewitnesses in the French capital wrote, read, and published while surviving four harsh months, from September 19, 1870 to January 28, 1871, when the city was surrounded by Prussian blockades, many froze and starved, and everyday life was brought initially to a standstill. Literary production, however, did not halt, as Foss reveals. Plays and poetry were composed and staged, newspapers grew in numbers and production. Parisians who had never written before transformed into diarists recording their experiences for history and for *les absents*, those located beyond Paris's impassable borders. Publishers sent books and other non-periodical texts flying off the presses to a restless public eager to consume them.

The book is organized around four sites of production--theaters, newspapers, personal writing, and publishing houses--containing two chapters of close textual readings and historical contextualization in each section. The introduction details Foss's approach to interpreting Siege archival materials through trauma theory "which suggests that traumatic events resist representation" (p. 8). He takes additional inspiration from the work of scholars, including art historian Hollis Clayson, who have focused on the Siege as a subject in its own right, as "a parenthesis to history" rather than as a precursor to the Commune of 1871 (p. 18). For Foss, the literature of the Siege documents a collective reckoning with the recent wartime tragedy of the nation and its military loss to Prussia. Yet it was also a discursive arena that publishing and cultural institutions, which had vested interests in the future direction of the newly declared Third Republic, sought to control.

Chapter one examines theaters, which were shuttered at the start of the blockade. With the closing of theaters and curfews limiting nightlife, Paris under siege became itself a spectacle. Theater-goers took up their opera glasses not to view actors on the stage but to spy on Prussians

on the ramparts, as well as to observe the spectacle of everyday life and how it had changed under the claustrophobic environment of confinement. When theaters did reopen they did so under pretenses that nationalist performances contributed to resistance efforts against the enemy and attendance at plays and poetry readings could be understood as Parisians' patriotic duty.

Theaters served multiple roles as makeshift hospitals, locations of escapism, and places of civic duty. Responsibilities within them were fluid: the actress Sarah Bernhardt, for instance, founded a field hospital (*ambulance*) in a theater and took up the work of nurse tending to the injured. Occasionally these roles were at cross-purposes, such as when the groans from a stricken soldier interrupted the performance on stage at the Comédie-Française. The theater also became a fraught site for politics in this tenuous moment when the Second Empire of Napoléon III had just fallen and the nascent Third Republic had yet to find its footing. Foss explores an illustrative episode in which a statue of Voltaire at the Comédie-Française was covered with a sheet under the pretext that the sight of the anticlerical Voltaire would offend nuns tending to wounded soldiers in the theater-turned-hospital. The "affaire Voltaire" caused a scandal (p. 47), viewed by the left as an act of censorship going against secularism and the separation of church and state, while conservative proponents lauded the statue's concealment in light of the presence of catholic nuns. This debate, Foss demonstrates, reflected larger anxieties about the direction of the nation, and which ideals—secular Republicanism or religious conservatism—would eventually take root and define the course of the rising Republic.

In chapter two, "Hugomania," Foss delves into the various, sometimes competing, interests surrounding well-attended recitations of Victor Hugo's poetry, including those of theater producers and actors, politicians, journalists, and Hugo himself. The staging of *Les Châtiments*, Hugo's invective against Napoléon III, had potential political implications and could have offered the public more than simply a distraction from war or a critique of the prior Empire. The Third Republic had been declared under unusual circumstances including an isolated capital city, which made it nearly impossible for a representative body to assemble and form a new government. Thus, the reading of *Les Châtiments* was positioned "to do the social and cultural work of declaring a new regime" (p. 52). However, in the end, Foss convincingly submits, the performance of *Les Châtiments* referenced revolution but was history-focused, centering on criticisms of the past Empire and even, paradoxically, offering an endorsement of Napoléon I as a favored alternative to his nephew rather than clarifying and imagining a truly democratic political vision for the nation.

Chapter three, "The *Feuilleton* at War," explores the Siege's "paper crisis"—a severe shortage in the supply of paper—which coincided with an explosion of desire for up-to-the-minute news on the part of a confined and anxious reading public (p. 76). Despite the scarcity of paper, the provisional government's lifting of censorship laws gave rise to a sudden increase in publication activity, as editors were able freely to express their political opinions with no fear of reprisal. Courting readers (and badly needed cash from sales), newspapers aired ideological differences and engaged in fiery political debates. As the Siege dragged on the cliffhanger became a frequent feature of *feuilletons*, *faits divers*, news stories and opinion pieces, reflecting the sense that Parisians felt they were stuck in an interminable event. The cliffhanger was also a strategy to stimulate consumption of newspapers and keep readers clamoring for the next edition. Newspapers created feelings of shared community but also of paranoia, stoking uncertainty and unease about the present and future.

Chapter four centers on a single military encounter that took place at the beginning of the Prussian war: the French army's defeat at Reichshoffen and its retreat to safety thanks to the self-sacrificing intervention of its cavalry. In this fascinating case study, Foss examines how the telling of this story in journalism and poetry as a heroic achievement on the part of French military forces reframed what was ostensibly a war loss into a nationalist, patriotic act. Literature, including plays, poems, and newspaper articles written about Reichshoffen, encouraged Parisians to understand their contemporary predicament as part of France's longer war history, one that often harkened back nostalgically to Napoléon I. While newspapers mythologized the battle they also critiqued it, giving readers reason to be suspicious of the veracity of any report on the combat that they might find in print.

The book's fifth chapter, "Letters to No One," delves into "Siege diaries," which Foss defines as the "private documents written for public consumption" that emerged during the conflict and formed a new literary genre with its own conventions (p. 121). "The Siege turned Paris into a city of diarists," he contends, and this new population of authors took up diary writing as a way to understand their current circumstances as "at once a moment of idleness and of overdetermined historical importance" (p. 120). These texts were both political and personal, as they documented the writer's individual experiences of day-to-day life while simultaneously recording Paris's history. Foss focuses on epistolary diarist Caroline Chaumorot, a newly wedded middle-class Parisian who wrote letters to her friend Blanche but was unable to send them due to the blockades. His examination of Chaumorot's letters illuminate the ways in which Siege confinement impacted women and men differently, how domestic space where women diarists wrote became political, and how the event created authors of people who had not been writers before.

Chapter six, "Historians of the Present," expands on the previous chapter, examining how Siege narratives were written for *les absents*, readers who did not live through the Siege firsthand. By envisioning this readership diarists contributed to a collective historical memory, one that could be shared by those trapped together within the capital city and enable those beyond to experience it in some way for themselves. Diaries reveal a new relationship to historical time, as authors marked the days not by the calendar but rather by the start of the Prussian blockades. Under "siege time" (p. 154), a heightened sense of the exceptional nature of what diary writers were experiencing emerged paradoxically alongside a feeling of monotony, as days strung together with no clear end in sight.

Chapter seven turns to tensions between traditional literary presses and smaller independent publishing operations that suddenly flourished. Deregulation of formerly restrictive censorship laws during the Siege allowed niche presses and upstart left-wing publishers to compete with the larger established printers who had dominated the publishing industry for decades. Foss gives a tantalizingly brief example of a woman printer referred to as "Mother Gattet" who supported the anti-establishment publications of writers who would later become Communards (p. 173). Inexpensive print formats enabled distribution of poems composed by soldiers stationed on the ramparts (or writers presenting themselves as such), and newspapers circulated inspirational patriotic song lyrics that could be sung to the tune of "The Marseillaise." At the same time, traditional large-scale publishers and advocacy organizations such as the Société des gens de lettres prioritized above all else the survival of the industry along with a stable Republic, which, it was hoped, would ensure the industry's continued existence after the end of the blockade. The

promulgation of revolutionary thought was thus secondary to the printing of texts, both Siege-related and not, that would support the subsistence of the publishing institution.

Chapter eight, “To Make the Past Public,” examines the curious resurgence of the eighteenth-century *libelle*, an often counter-factual “short salacious pamphlet” about elite leaders that had in the past inspired revolutionary fervor and helped to depose monarchs (p. 192). During the Siege *libelles* made a comeback, but rather than stoking uprisings they looked to history to justify the already accomplished regime change of the present. A thought-provoking “Coda” reflects on the legacy of the Siege beyond the events of the Commune that immediately followed it. One important impact of the literature of the Siege, Foss argues, was to make French citizens all too aware of the realities of state violence, which would inform how they then prepared and mobilized themselves for the twentieth century’s two World Wars. A nuanced reading of Guy de Maupassant’s devastating and, Foss intriguingly suggests, proto-absurdist short story, “Deux Amis,” supports this conclusion.

*The Culture of War* brilliantly presents the contradictions, innovations, and political tensions that played out in a variety of narrative forms during a time of war, stagnation, and confinement, when “culture unexpectedly flourished as the fog of war fell upon the city of lights” (p. 3). Meticulously researched, the book mines numerous overlooked archives to bring Siege writing to life. It is a rigorously argued work of scholarship and Foss’s engaging prose ensures that it is an engrossing read, one that would appeal to students and could be integrated well into course syllabi. Impressively wide-reaching, *The Culture of War* has much to offer to scholars of late-nineteenth-century France and the history of journalism, theater, and personal writing under trauma, as well as war literature of the period more generally. Interest in this compelling book is sure to endure long after memories of 2020 COVID-19 confinement eventually begin to fade.

## NOTES

[1] Throughout the book, Foss capitalizes “Siege” when referring to the historical event.

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