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Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon, *The Man Who Murdered Admiral Darlan: Vichy, the Allies and the Resistance in French North Africa*, trans. Richard Carswell. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2023. 228 pp. Archives, bibliography, suggestions for further reading, acknowledgements, and index. \$180.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1032520988; \$49.49 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1003405207.

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The Man Who Murdered Admiral Darlan is the English language translation of Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon's *Une juvénile fureur: Bonnier de la Chapelle, l'assassin de l'amiral Darlan* (Perrin, 2019). Vergez-Chaignon is one of France's best-known historians of World War II and the Occupation. In this as in her other works, she combines meticulous archival research with enthralling storytelling. Eschewing both theoretical analysis and footnotes (the extensive documentation is in the "Archives" section at the end of the book), Vergez-Chaignon has written a work both useful to historians and accessible to a much wider audience. The book recounts the events that led to the fatal meeting between the assassin, Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle, and his victim in the Summer Palace in Algiers on Christmas Eve, 1942. Bonnier de la Chapelle, barely 20 years old, was executed by firing squad two days after the crime, following a rapid and, Vergez-Chaignon contends, bungled trial before a military court.

The Man Who Murdered Admiral Darlan has two foci, that can be encapsulated in two questions. Why did Bonnier de la Chapelle assassinate Darlan, and why was he, and only he, punished for the crime even though he clearly was part of a larger conspiracy? A third question dominates the final chapters: why was Bonnier de la Chapelle, reviled in 1942, posthumously pardoned and elevated to a hero of the Resistance in 1945, along with certain of his co-conspirators, even though in 1942 the latter disavowed the crime and allowed Bonnier de la Chapelle to go to his death alone? The answers, which have much to say about the complex politics of Occupied France and Algeria during the war, as well as the politics of memory in post-war France, are clearly and succinctly outlined in the book. As the title of the French version reflects, Vergez-Chaignon argues that Bonnier de la Chapelle was a reckless youth, determined to fight the "Boches" in any way he could, and thus easily manipulated by those who persuaded him to shoot Darlan, and who put the gun in his hand. But at the end, the young and naïve assassin showed greater honesty and courage than his co-conspirators who mostly abandoned him.

Fernand Bonnier de la Chapelle was born in Algiers in 1922, the son of a French father, Eugène, and an Italian mother, Gianna Scorcia. His parents married in Italy at the end of World War I, but moved to Algiers in 1921, where Eugène worked as a professor of Italian for the local Dante Society, an occasional court translator, and ultimately a journalist, as editor for *La Dépêche Algérienne*. When Fernand was seven his parents divorced, his father remarried, and Fernand was

sent to the Paris home of his affluent uncle, also called Fernand Bonnier de la Chappelle. He was enrolled in prestigious private schools and enjoyed holidays in the Dordogne. The Occupation in 1940 put an end to all that. Fernand was devastated by the French defeat and desperate to join de Gaulle in London and fight the Germans. Not reticent by nature, Fernand made no secret of his Gaullist sympathies. After he participated in a public protest on November 11, 1940 and narrowly escaped arrest, his uncle decided it was too dangerous for him to remain in France. On December 24, 1940 Fernand returned to Algiers. For the next two years, he drifted mostly aimless and frustrated in Algiers, until his Gaullist sympathies and reckless hunt for passage to London again brought him to the attention of the authorities. His father, fearing for his safety, ceded to Fernand's incessant demands to return to France, where his uncle promised to settle him safely out of the way in Lyon where Fernand could continue his studies. They booked passage for him to sail to Marseille on November 7, but his ship never left port because of the Allied invasion of North Africa, "Operation Torch."

Vergez-Chaignon succinctly lays out the sequence of events leading to Admiral Darlan's ascension to power in North Africa in December 1942. The Allies needed someone French to rally the African colonies, but Roosevelt distrusted de Gaulle and was determined that someone, anyone, else had to head up the French government and military forces in North Africa. Initially, the Allies opted for General Henri Giraud as their proxy. Giraud, a prisoner of war whose recent escape from a German prison camp raised his profile and popularity, had much less political baggage than Darlan. He was, by his own admission, politically inept, but to the Americans seemed more malleable than de Gaulle, and less likely to set himself up as a dictator once in power. Darlan, by contrast, was well-liked in military circles, especially in the strongly pro-Vichy French Army of Africa but was based in Vichy and deeply tainted by his support for collaboration and repression of the nascent Resistance. To many, he appeared to be a careerist, a holdover from the hated Third Republic with few convictions. The small but vocal Gaullist contingent, to which Bonnier de la Chapelle belonged, despised Darlan.

None of this would have mattered, except that by chance when the Allied invasion took place, Darlan also happened to be in North Africa visiting his ill son, and it soon became clear to both Darlan and the Allies that the latter needed him. The Allies could not afford a protracted battle against French military forces nor, once they had control of the colony, could they defend against the German counterattack in Tunisia without the support of the Army of Africa. The price of that support was putting Darlan in charge of the government, with Giraud under him, to save face for the general and his supporters among the Allies. Strategically the solution made great sense, especially as Giraud himself made it clear that he did not want to run the colonial bureaucracy, and the leaders of the Army of Africa preferred Darlan by far. Darlan, for his part, sensed that the military tide of the war was turning and, ever the opportunist, accepted the Allies' offer.

Bonnier de la Chapelle once again found himself marooned in Algiers, unable to find a way to join de Gaulle, and equally stymied in his attempts to find a way to fight the Germans directly. Like most of his friends, he was convinced that Darlan had to be removed from power, and it was increasingly apparent that this could only be achieved by eliminating Darlan himself. At this juncture, several of Bonnier de la Chapelle's friends devised a bizarre scheme to bring to Algeria Henri d'Orléans, Count of Paris and Pretender to the French throne. The ringleaders of this group, Henri d'Astier de la Vigerie, at this point assistant secretary of political affairs and in charge of the police in Algiers, and Father Louis Cordier, fomented a plot to smuggle the

Pretender to Algeria. Their plan was to remove Darlan from power (or remove Darlan entirely if necessary) and make Orléans head of a caretaker government until France could be liberated and the French could choose their own government. In the eyes of the conspirators, Orléans had the merit of not collaborating, with Vichy or the Germans, or with the British for that matter, whom many French had not forgiven for Mers-el-Kébir. His conservative credentials were solid, without a whiff of communism, and he could thus rally the French military and civilian population under a stable, provisional regime dominated neither by the British or the Americans nor by the Germans.

The scheme was wildly improbable on many levels, beginning with the idea that the French people, or the military, would rally to Orléans, or that the Allies would accept him in Darlan's stead. But d'Astier de la Vigerie and Cordier managed to convince a small but influential circle in Algiers that the plan could work, and Orléans was smuggled into Algeria and settled in a villa outside of Algiers while the conspirators sought to put their plan in motion. The second, and essential, step was to remove Darlan. Since the Admiral showed no signs of wanting to step down, that meant assassinating him, which in turn meant finding someone to do the deed. Bonnier de la Chapelle, while not their first choice, was easily persuaded to assume the role of assassin. Hence on Christmas Eve, 1942, armed with a gun that d'Astier de la Vigerie's son Jean-Bernard gave him on the drive to the summer palace, Bonnier de la Chapelle shot Darlan, who died soon after reaching the hospital.

The investigation of the crime was rushed, perfunctory, and thus badly bungled. None of the conspirators, including Henri d'Astier de la Vigerie and Cordier, did much to help Bonnier de la Chapelle, perhaps unsurprising because even if many people in Algiers were not sorry to see Darlan go, many others regretted the Admiral. And no one rallied to the Count of Paris, who was quietly expelled from Algeria. In the weeks after Bonnier de la Chapelle's execution, Henri d'Astier de la Vigerie, Cordier, several bona fide participants in the scheme, along with a dozen or so Gaullist sympathizers who had nothing to do with it, were arrested. But by the end of the war, all were liberated and de Gaulle himself decorated Astier de la Vigerie for his Resistance activities. It was left primarily to Bonnier de la Chapelle's father and uncle to rally public support for his posthumous pardon and rehabilitation which de Gaulle accorded.

What can we learn from Bonnier de la Chapelle's story, besides that he was a victim of his own impetuous nature and the machinations of those around him? Perhaps the most important lesson is the malleability of the meaning and identity of the Resistance. As Vergez-Chaigon has shown with her research on the post-war purges and the "vichysto-résistants" (those who initially supported Vichy but rallied to the Resistance after the German invasion of the Occupied Zone), who was a "true" resister and when and why people chose to support the Resistance, were fraught questions in 1945 and remain so even today. Bonnier de la Chapelle was undoubtedly a sincere Gaullist desperate to find a way to fight the Germans. But can we count someone like Henri d'Astier de la Vigerie as a resister in 1942, if his goal was to replace Pétain with a monarch, even a provisional one? What did it mean to "resist" in the tortuous politics of wartime France? The French were buffeted by opposing forces, not only the Allies and the Axis, but also the struggles between the Vichy regime and the Resistance, and the conflicts within the Resistance between the Gaullists and those opposed to the general, who considered themselves patriots, desperate to free their country from Nazi rule but determined to avoid the Anglo-American domination of France as well. Loyalties and convictions shifted rapidly in the political quicksand of Occupied France and North Africa.

In a technique becoming increasingly common in fiction and some creative non-fiction, especially journalism, the writing style of *The Man Who Murdered Admiral Darlan* pivots between the past tense—for narration of what writers call “back story”—and the present tense when recounting the “immediate,” especially in 1942. While the goal here is likely to put the reader “in the moment” of the events as they unfolded, it also creates a temporal instability, especially when applied to Bonnier de la Chapelle’s earlier years, prior to 1942. The technique works much better as the tempo of the book builds during the narrative of his final months in 1942. But whether the reader is comfortable with the tense changes, overall, *The Man Who Shot Admiral Darlan* is an absorbing book likely to attract a wide readership, and suitable for use in the classroom. The English version of the book unfortunately lacks the images in the French edition, one reason why those who can read the original French are probably better off choosing that. But for those who cannot read French, Routledge has done us a great service in making this excellent work available in English.

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