

H-France Review Vol. 2 (January 2002), No. 6

Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xix+660pp. Notes, maps, abbreviation tables and index. \$35.00 ISBN 0-19-820706-9.

Review by Robert Zaretsky, University of Houston.

Nearly thirty years ago in *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, Robert Paxton revealed a regime driven by jumbled and frequently opposing ideological visions. There were fleeting, ragged projects advocated by corporatists and regionalists, traditionalists and technocrats, anti-Semites and personalists, Maurrasians and pacifists, syndicalists and fascists jostling one another for a space under the umbrella of the so-called *Révolution nationale*. Paxton made the damning case that Vichy's leaders--ranging from Pétain and Laval through Darlan and Flandin--actively pursued a policy of collaboration with Nazi Germany--an ambition as deluded as it was immoral. In addition to subverting the image of France so carefully burnished for more than 30 years by Vichy apologists, Paxton also undermined the claims that these four "dark years" represented a rupture or parenthesis in French history. Instead, he showed the continuities--administrative, ideological, political and social--that made Vichy a bridge between the late Third Republic and the postwar regimes.

Since then, a vast amount of original work on Vichy has been done on both sides of the Atlantic. This research has now been brilliantly synthesized by Julian Jackson in *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*. This huge, exhilarating work reveals the undiminished strength of Paxton's interpretation. Vichy historiography is, in a sense, the house that Paxton built. But as with any house, certain repairs and revisions are inevitable. In the case of Paxton's interpretation, most of the revisions have centered on the nature of resistance and collaboration, public opinion, and society, especially the role of women (as well as the image of women imposed upon the nation by its male leaders). It is one of the great merits of Jackson's book to present the findings of recent works on these issues. He thus offers an account that corrects certain, inevitable biases in Paxton's work, yet by and large confirms the portrait of a nation Paxton painted three decades ago.

In Part I, Jackson discusses the years leading to the extraordinary events of 1940. His inter-war France is a nation pushed and pulled by thinkers and writers who, though hailing from different ideological horizons, were joined by a common disillusion with the Third Republic. Many of these intellectuals are the usual suspects, found for example in Zeev Sternhell's works on French fascism. Yet Jackson avoids his colleague's reductionism. He notes how certain organizations hostile to aspects of the Republic such as Jeunes équipes could shelter both Protestant liberals such as Edmond Mercier and Maurrasians such as Raphael Alibert, who subsequently served just long enough as Vichy's minister of justice to promulgate the first anti-Semitic statute. Jackson also dwells on the "non-conformists" such as Emmanuel Mounier, Thierry Maulnier and Robert Aron who, in various ways, rebelled against the tradition of republican individualism and sought to reintroduce the "spiritual" in society. Yet as Jackson emphasizes, though these thinkers were fond of quoting Péguy's cry that "the revolution will be moral or it will not be"--thus expressing their disgust with a morally bankrupt Republic--their widely varied itineraries under Vichy reveal that Péguy meant different things to different audiences.

A specialist of the Popular Front, Jackson also considers the impact of *les guerres franco-françaises*: the great social, political, and ideological struggles that pulsated across the nation. Along with the disquieting growth of the French Communist Party, rancorous debate over the *école unique*, and fragmentation of the traditional right, Jackson underscores the psychological shock the Popular Front's victory had on the bourgeoisie. Citing Marc Bloch's observation that the Left's electoral triumph in 1936 was comparable to the June Days of 1848, Jackson describes a mobilized, powerful working class confronting a fearful urban middle-class, reinforcing the belief that traditional class, gender, and social distinctions were about to be overthrown. This seismic movement, joined by the nearly simultaneous outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, convulsed the landscape of French politics. The right was radicalized, with Jacques Doriot, the leader of the Parti populaire français, lurching towards fascism and Colonel de la Rocque's authoritarian Parti social français (the political reincarnation of the earlier Croix de feu) growing in number and strength. But, as Jackson notes, there was an equally momentous "recomposition of the left" (p. 79) shaped by a visceral anti-communism. In the wake of the events of 1936, communism elbowed fascism aside in the collective nightmare of the French bourgeoisie, dividing and distracting a nation whose eyes should have been open and fixed on Nazi Germany.

In pursuit of continuities between the inter-war period and Vichy, Jackson offers a number of novel perspectives. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s there were several French organizations and individuals committed to Franco-German reconciliation. While the motives were varied--there was the pragmatism of Aristide Briand or the pacifism of Jean Giono--the ambitions were alike: reconciliation with Germany. It is in light of this policy, Jackson suggests, that Pierre Laval may well have understood his notorious meeting with Hitler at Montoire in 1940 as little different from his mentor Briand's meeting with Gustav Stresemann at Thoiry in 1926. Perhaps more importantly, Jackson stresses the deepening authoritarian strain in the late Third Republic. Daladier's government not only isolated and pursued the French Communist Party but also sought a rapprochement with the Church and proposed remedies for the declining birth rate. It even anticipated the anti-Semitic and xenophobic legislation of Vichy by the passage of a law facilitating the denaturalization of naturalized citizens who were "unworthy" of French citizenship. It was the Republic that also created the first internment camps on French soil in order to house (and isolate) the waves of refugees fleeing war-torn Spain.

Yet the shift from the late Republic to Vichy was hardly foreordained. The many differences and discontinuities between the two periods--discussed in pertinent detail by Jackson--point to the trap of historical inevitability. The sensitivity to contingency and chance is manifest in Jackson's dissection of France's military collapse and the subsequent, sad train of events. It was a particular surprise to read an account of this "strange defeat" that does not lead with a passage from Marc Bloch's famous work by the same title. Instead, Jackson quotes an obscure--at least to this reader--historian, Sir Arthur Bryant, on the courage and fortitude of the English people during the Battle of Britain. Why? Because Bryant, before becoming a patriotic bard and supporter of Winston Churchill, had been an enthusiastic appeaser, anti-Semite, and admirer of Nazi Germany. Jackson wonders what Bryant would have become had the Battle of Britain ended differently. Would he have become the court herald of a British Pétain? An excellent question and one that reminds us, as Jackson intends for it to do, of history's unpredictability.

Historical contingency is variously emphasized in Part II, which is devoted to the complex nature of the Vichy regime and the knotty issue of collaboration. For example, Jackson writes that when in the confusion of the summer of 1940 French parliamentary deputies gave full powers to Pétain to revise the constitution, it was hardly a vote for an authoritarian regime, much less support for the as yet unborn regime of Vichy. Having underscored the careful distance maintained by Pétain from politics in the inter-war period, Jackson rightly notes that "the size of the majority was essentially a vote of confidence in Pétain, and it is entirely explicable without invoking the black arts of Laval" (p. 133). The granting of *pleins pouvoirs* enabled the octogenarian hero of Verdun to undertake his policies; they did not render these policies explicit or inevitable. This was not, in short, the last days of Weimar Germany. On the subjects of collaboration and the National Revolution, Jackson offers an important insight, wrapped in a

typically sharp formula: “For Pétain collaboration was the instrument of the National Revolution, and for Laval the National Revolution was the instrument of collaboration” (p. 140). While Laval’s concern was to give France a place in the so-called New European Order, Pétain’s concern was the “renovation”—a term he much preferred to “revolution”—of France. Though Jackson shows understandable disdain for the hothouse-like atmosphere at Vichy—“Vichy was a dull place, with few distractions; there was little to do except plot and hate” (p. 143)—he does take great care and seriousness in his study of the regime’s complexity.

In its outlines, Jackson’s account of the regime is familiar, largely following the path first traced by Paxton. Yet he has a remarkable ability to circle around and catch odd angles rather than directly confront and tackle political and moral issues; to provoke thought, rather than render judgement. For example, the section devoted to collaboration is subtitled “Jean Moulin: Collaborator.” Jackson points out that the great hero of the Resistance had served as prefect of the Eure-et-Loir through September 1940—a stint whose professionalism and efficiency earned the plaudits of the local German commander. Hence the need to use the term “collaboration” with care. Or, more importantly, he underscores the dilemmas of economic collaboration, since a precondition of France’s economic recovery was German assistance. As a result, while the Germans posed a threat to the French economy, “they also provided the only prospect of its recovery. Negotiations were therefore unavoidable” (p. 187). But Jackson’s sensitivity to the paradoxes of the period does not entail lack of moral acuity—on the contrary. Take his discussion of the arts and collaboration. Jackson asserts that the writers who contributed to Drieu la Rochelle’s *Nouvelle Revue Française*, while not all collaborators, were nevertheless “aware of the implications of their decision, and the roster of contributions provides a gallery of the more celebrated writers willing to lend their name, at some level, to collaboration” (p. 205).

Part III shifts from the policies and personalities at the “shabby and impoverished court” of Vichy to the everyday life under the regime and the Germans. Here, Jackson makes important use of the distinction first introduced by Philippe Burrin between collaboration and the less controversial term “accommodation.” Briefly, Burrin persuasively argues that people can “accommodate” themselves to an occupying force in three ways: structural accommodation, or the maintaining of essential services; voluntary accommodation, or the independent and deliberate pursuit of agreements with the occupier for professional, group, or individual interests; and political accommodation, or the admiration and emulation of the occupier. Yet Jackson rightly resists setting aside altogether the term “collaboration,” for it has an essential historical validity: the concept of collaboration “did eventually come to structure the way people perceived their own conduct and the conduct of others. In that sense collaboration ‘existed’” (p. 243).

Equally important, Jackson reveals the ways in which France’s geographical diversity led to equally diverse experiences under Vichy, the Occupation, and, increasingly, the Resistance. Making exhaustive use of the many local histories—ranging from articles and monographs to unpublished doctoral theses—that have been written over the last quarter century, Jackson reviews the many different maps that can be drawn across wartime France. There were the borders created by the Germans occupiers, the borders previously established by French administrators, and the unofficial yet no less imposing borders wrought by time and geography such as the borders between town and country, Protestant and Catholic, even northerner and southerner. The experience of the northern departments, occupied twice by the Germans in less than forty years, was dramatically different from the southern departments, less exposed to the howling of history. Yet at the same time, southerners, hobbled by monocultural production, able to fill wineglasses but not stomachs, envied northerners living, or so it was thought, in a land of Cockaigne. And, by drawing from the work of historians such as Sarah Fishman, Miranda Pollard and Paula Schwartz, Jackson pursues the frequently stark lines drawn between men and women. For example, he dwells on the lot of the wives of prisoners-of-war, who were caught in the violent contradictions of the regime, praised in the broadsides of propaganda yet subjected to everyday jealousy and spite.

Jackson also expertly summarizes the research on public opinion under Vichy, which has been the most contested aspect of Paxton's research. Work with archival documents unavailable in the 1970s--most importantly, prefectural reports and the summaries of the notorious Postal Control Committees (which Jackson neglects to mention were created in the twilight of the Third Republic, not under Vichy)--has refined the earlier historical picture. Though Jackson rightly warns against generalizations and distinguishes among various socio-economic as well as geographic groups, it can perhaps safely be said that the great majority of the French were disaffected from Vichy much earlier than originally thought--perhaps as early as the winter of 1941-42. The French also distinguished between the regime--be it in the person of Laval or Admiral Darlan--and Pétain, who remained a figure of hope and respect through the end of 1942 and, in certain cases, even beyond. Jackson's analysis of the cult of Pétain is telling and lucid, reminding us of its grounding in the collective trauma of 1940. But he is rather too gentle in his treatment of Pétain's discourses, avoiding the dry yet damning analysis of Pétainspeak found in the work of Gérard Miller--a work that somehow escaped Jackson's encyclopedic coverage.[1]

There is, as well, the perennial subject of artists and writers under Vichy. Human vanity and self-importance are universal weaknesses, but they are most striking when shown by public figures. In the end, there were few writers--Jean Guéhenno, Roger Martin du Gard, and René Char are notable examples--who could resist the lure of publication. By and large, writers wrote not simply because they could not live without a public but also because they could not live at all. Writing helped put food on the table. As for those who, such as Sartre, claimed that their works were coded calls for resistance, one must be skeptical. This was certainly the case with, say, Louis Aragon's poetry. But as Jackson notes, the production of Sartre's *Les Mouches*, hailed as a resistance text, hardly made a political ripple when it first appeared: "What, then, was the value of a resistance message that was so oblique as to be invisible to all but a few initiates?" (p. 315). Impatient with such posturing, Jackson is also commonsensical and fair, an attitude reflected in his review of French cinema. He mostly rejects readings of movies such as *Les Visiteurs du soir* as allegories of resistance and concludes that the overwhelming number of movies made during the war years simply reflect "Vichy's desperate wish to believe the outside world did not exist" (p. 321).

Of course, this was a wish that, at tremendous cost, French Jewry embraced. The history of Vichy and the Jews (both French and foreign) has attracted an extraordinary amount of attention, political as well as historical, over the last couple of decades. This sustained, at times obsessive focus has tended to skew the historical reality. Though a treacherous subject for historians, there have been recent and commendable efforts made to readjust the perspective. Henry Rousso, for instance, argues that anti-Semitic ideology and practice under Vichy risks becoming an "exclusive paradigm"--a French euphemism for the 300 pound gorilla in the kitchen of history. Jackson echoes this critique. He traces the familiar, low, and depressing tale of a state policy driven no less by the blinding desire to retain the shreds of autonomy as by an indigenous French tradition of anti-Semitism--a mixture of motives that condemned to death tens of thousands of men, women, and children. In Jackson's words, "From 1942, Vichy behaved towards the Jews like a family building a bonfire in its backyard despite its knowledge that a forest fire is raging just over the fence" (p. 360). Yet Jackson rightly emphasizes that, for the great majority of the nation, official anti-Semitic policy was simply not a major concern. Present-day preoccupations and perceptions necessarily distort the reality of the period; in the end, "it would be as wrong as to read the entire history of the Occupation through the prism of anti-Semitism as it would be to leave it out entirely" (p. 354).

Jackson claims the saving of Jewish lives as a form of resistance. This manifests Jackson's generous and, quite simply, more truthful framing of the issue of resistance--an approach, contained in Part IV, influenced by the work of, among others, John Sweets and H.R. Kedward. Yet though generous, the approach is not indiscriminating. Drawing on a distinction made by Jacques Semelin between "dissidence" and "resistance," Jackson reminds us that it was first of all essential to invent a resistance--even the concept of resistance--before it could be joined. One of the strengths of Jackson's account is the

emphasis on how motley, confused, and nearly perverse were the origins of the French Resistance. A necessarily amateurish and hesitant process as varied as the nation itself, the Resistance remains at times as mysterious to the modern historian as it was to contemporary observers. This was certainly the case for General de Gaulle and his Free French movement in London, who for at least a year knew next to nothing of resistance activity. The General's ignorance eventually shifted into skepticism—an attitude returned in spades by Resistance leaders, who knew little about this obscure general and, not unjustifiably, suspected him of hostility for all things republican. (In fact, de Gaulle was an equally unknown quantity for his British hosts. Jackson cites a passage from Alexander Cadogan's diary in the summer of 1940 in which he writes that all he knew about de Gaulle was that he had "a head like a pineapple and hips like a woman's.")

At times, even Jackson's enviable gifts for narrative and exposition are challenged by the complexities of the history of the Resistance, dully reflected in the alphabet soup of acronyms of the mushrooming organizations and movements and clandestine journals. Yet he provides an admirable survey of the phenomenon, benefiting especially from Kedward's path breaking work on the resistance in southern France and his concept of outlaw culture. Even here, Jackson maintains his critical perspective, noting that the local maquis were not always local heroes: "The peasantry's attitude towards the Maquis was one of solidarity tempered by prudence, respect tempered by apprehension" (p. 489). Perhaps more dubiously, he expresses this same, critical, nearly contraries position on the so-called "resisters of the eleventh hour." It was only the eleventh hour, Jackson argues, to those of us who, ensconced in our reading chairs, now know that the twelfth hour was nigh. In short, these men and women had no idea how long their engagement would last; in the end, joining the Maquis in 1944 "was more dangerous than ever before" (p. 545). Approximately 24,000 members of the FFI lost their lives: the "last hour" will last an eternity for many of these fighters. Yet it is difficult to accept this position fully. After all, common sense seems to dictate that the young men and women joining the Resistance in the spring and summer of 1944 had a clearer idea of the future than did founding figures like Henri Frénay or Lucie Aubrac. As for the Lucie Aubrac, in any case, Jackson pays welcome attention to the role of women in the Resistance: "From the beginning women were prominent both in opposition to Vichy—notably in food demonstrations—and in the formal Resistance" (p. 491). And he also pays attention to foreigners, ranging from Spanish republicans to Poles and assorted refugees from central and east Europe.

Jackson devotes the concluding section to the Liberation and, according to one's perspective, the tomorrows that *chantent* or *déchantent*. As with the issues of resistance and everyday life, the experience of the liberation unfolded in ways specific to the different regions, *départements*, even towns and villages—a point made forcefully by Megan Koreman. Jackson emphasizes the great confusion of the early days of the Liberation—"COMAC [the military command of the Resistance] controlled less of France than the early Capetians" (p. 549)—and the inevitable excesses, especially the sorry history of the *tondues*. These were women most often charged with so-called "horizontal collaboration" and who, having their heads shaved in public, lived their lives as pariahs. Yet, as Jackson makes clear, these women often were punished less for specific crimes than for a certain "style of life"—e.g., "loose morals" or rumored abortions. This not only reveals an unhappy continuity between the narrow and repellent morality of Vichy and certain elements in the Resistance, but also how the self-image of these two opposing worlds was joined by a similar ideological emphasis upon purity and masculinity. Rather than concluding with a sigh and a shrug, Jackson instead ends his massive study with a call to confront the French past in all of its complexity and contradictions. I cannot conceive of a more impressive or inspiring model for such a stance than the very book he has written. It will undoubtedly stand as the standard reference not just for the period, but for the way history ought to be written, for a very long time to come.

NOTES

[1] Gérard Miller, *Les pousse-au-jour du Maréchal Pétain* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

[2] Megan Koreman, *The Expectation of Justice: France, 1944-1946* (Durham, N.C.: 1999). A work often cited by Jackson.

Robert Zaretsky
University of Houston
rzaretsky@uh.edu

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172