

H-France Review Vol. 5 (May 2005), No. 51

Emmanuel Filhol, *Un camp de concentration français: les tsiganes alsaciens-lorrains à Crest, 1915-1919*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2004. 181 pp. Illustrations, bibliography. 20 €, (pb) ISBN 2-7061-1187-9.

Review by Leonard V. Smith, Oberlin College.

In the thirty years since the original publication of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), historians of a juridical bent have turned incarceration on its head.[1] No longer just the consequence of crimes real and imagined, incarceration has become historical crime itself. Gypsies in the Great War of 1914-1918 were one of many categories of victim of this crime. By long tradition ambulatory and resistant to state oversight, a healthy population had found safe haven in Alsace and Lorraine, a culturally liminal region demarcating in some sense the western border of Central Europe. But the outbreak of war in 1914 between France and Germany ipso facto rendered at least some of them a suspect population. It suddenly mattered a great deal to the French who was who in the small sliver of the "lost territories" reconquered in the otherwise disastrous French offensive at the beginning of the war. Gypsies, of course, were neither ethnic Germans nor ethnic French. By December 1915, 159 gypsies, comprising men, women, and children, were evacuated from Alsace and Lorraine and interned in Crest in the Department of the Drôme. Filhol seeks to tell their story, to right the historical wrong of silence in their regard, and further to take on what he seems to see as unseemly French arrogance about their moral superiority in their own version of "the good war."

It would seem that without trying to, Filhol has written a book strongly reminiscent of studies of the United States internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II.[2] Filhol, drawing from the venerable descriptive traditions of French social history, provided a wealth of detail about daily life for the interned gypsies. We learn, for example, that at a time of considerable manpower shortage in the French army, this tiny community merited no fewer than twenty-four guards, two sergeants, two corporals, and twenty privates (p. 56). Like the interned Issei and Nisei in the United States, the gypsies of Crest found themselves subjected to all manner of petty and pointless humiliations. In April 1916, the sub-prefect of the Drôme forbade *limonadiers* to sell to gypsies, for no apparent reason. As late as June 1919, more than seven months after the Armistice, the military commander of the region felt it necessary to request that the prefect place barbed wire around the old convent in which the gypsies were housed (p.68). Yet life for the gypsies of Crest went on. They worked when permitted to do so, pleaded incessantly with the authorities for release, and waited.

But the limitations of this book seem implicit in its juridical intent. The gypsies of Crest were incarcerated because of who they were, not because of anything they had done. Unjust incarceration itself thus became the crime that the historian sought to prosecute. Filhol has assembled an impressive dossier of evidence that convincingly leads the reader to convict the French authorities responsible for it. But then what? The brute fact is that against the backdrop of dreadful things perpetrated upon civilians in the Great War, even the civilians in occupied France and Belgium as studied by Annette Becker, to say nothing of the Ottoman Armenians, internment in Crest seems a somewhat marginal crime.[3] It is in no way to defend the French authorities to say so. Of more interest than documenting it, then, would seem an investigation of the problems in the French war effort to which incarceration of gypsies appeared to be the answer.

NOTES

[1] The standard English translation is *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, trans., (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

[2] See, for example, Sandra Taylor, *Jewel of the Desert: Japanese-American Internment at Topaz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[3] Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la grande guerre: humanitaire et culture de guerre, populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre* (Paris: Noësis, 1998).

Leonard V. Smith
Oberlin College
leonard.v.smith@oberlin.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172