
H-France Review Vol. 5 (August 2005), No. 89

Nicholas Atkin, *The Forgotten French: Exiles in the British Isles, 1940-44*. New York and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. x + 340 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 (cl). ISBN 0-7190-6438-4.

Review by Nicole Dombrowski Risser, Towson University.

If you had been born in London in the summer of 1944 to a French mother married to a French or even perhaps to a British father, not only would you be sixty-one years old in 2005, but you would have been a likely subject for a film titled, *Born in Britain, prepared by the Amis des Volontaires [sic] Français* (AVF) and circulated throughout the UK on the eve of the Allied victory in Europe. As the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II continues this year, commemorated in various ways around the world, professional historians and casual students of history must stand humbled by how much we continue to learn about the large and small events of the war. The mass scale of human displacement that impacted soldiers and civilians alike, transforming and often ending lives, made an imprint not only on the generations who experienced the war first hand, but on those generations that continue to live with the reverberations of the war's destruction and reconfiguration of modernity and mankind. Nicholas Atkin's study of the French community exiled in Britain during the war offers a microscopic examination of one small, but significant, ex-patriot community's wartime displacement, reminding readers that even abroad, the French had ceased by 1940 to act in any unified and orchestrated manner.

Atkin's chief aim is to challenge the popularly received wisdom that the majority of French living in Britain during the war supported the Free French movement born of the audacity and impertinence of French rebel general, Charles DeGaulle. In this endeavor, Atkin's book merely joins a quarter century-old movement in both popular and professional history that is devoted to undressing the Gaullist myth of a readily resistant France. If Atkin's book only sought to prove that the French in Britain did not, in the main, quickly jump to join DeGaulle, the book would have little to recommend it. Instead, *The Forgotten French* details the diversity of the French colony living not only in London, but scattered throughout Great Britain, unveiling to readers the complexity of French wartime experience abroad and underscoring how improbable DeGaulle's emergence as an exile leader really was.

The trick of the book, and its appeal for this social historian, is that *The Forgotten French* attacks many of the standard debates about Franco-British diplomacy, between the rise of Vichy in July 1940 and France's *Libération* in 1944, through the eyes of the divided French exile community and the British agencies assigned to manage and guard it. Hence, in three autonomous chapters that relate nicely to one another, Atkin introduces us to the main French constituencies in Britain—refugees, servicemen, and consular staff. Refugees crossed the Channel in fishing boats or, in rarer cases, caught rides on escaping military vessels. Atkin's sources do not allow him to do a full scale social history of these refugee communities, but by examining the documents of French and British welfare agencies devoted to their assistance, he captures French refugees' daily struggles and political attitudes during the period of May 1940 to the summer of 1941. Not surprisingly, most French refugees had not fled to Britain to join up with DeGaulle and mount a resistance, directed from abroad against the Germans. Instead, like refugees on the continent, their flight drew from a desire to avoid the violence of the war. Choosing to flee to Britain produced several hardships in the form of language barriers, idleness, cultural misunderstanding, and prolonged poverty. In a few extreme cases, French refugees encountered arbitrarily applied justice and the British imprisoned them for suspicion of spreading defeatist or Trotskyist propaganda (which made their fate no different than had they remained in France).

The entire book revolves around a pivotal decision taken by the British War Cabinet on July 10, 1940. Britain's War Cabinet debated whether to intern all the French living in Britain for the duration of the war (p. 196). Ultimately the British could not find legal grounds for doing so and thus the French lived scattered in isolated communities throughout Great Britain. Given the devolution of diplomatic relations between France and Britain addressed by Atkin at great length later in the book, it seems that the British made a great leap of faith in not interning the French exile population. I think Atkin could have convinced the reader earlier, and more effectively, of the importance of his study of *The Forgotten French* exile community if he would have introduced this debate earlier in the book's organization and explained it in greater detail. The decision seems noteworthy when compared to the U.S. decision to intern Japanese-Americans and even when compared to the British policy of interning the Boers during the Second Boer War from 1889-1902. The policy also marked a departure from internment practices employed by Britain during World War I. [1] Atkin explains that the "forgotten French" posed no security threat at the end of the day, but how did the War Cabinet come to that conclusion so early on?

The decision also came on the heels of the arrest of hundreds of French sailors and naval officers and the seizure of their ships during the last week of June and the first week of July in preparation for Britain's bombing of the French naval fleet at Mers-el-Kébir on July 3, 1940. Perhaps astutely, the British feared retaliation of French naval personnel upon hearing of Britain's destruction of the French fleet. One French officer, interned in posh headquarters, expressed his indignation at the British thought that he would not have ordered the destruction himself. Most servicemen found fast release from British prisons. However, Atkin paints a dim picture of the treatment afforded a defeated ally at the hands of its friends. French naval men found it difficult to imagine a role for themselves in Britain's continued struggle against Germany. Without a fleet, they found it difficult to imagine a victory for DeGaulle. Atkin documents the French sailors' spiraling demoralization and also the indecision within British circles about how to employ them in the service of the Allied struggle. What we get from Atkin's study of demobilized, exiled servicemen is the anatomy of a significant failure. Atkin shows that the French servicemen bore some responsibility for their own idleness and defeatism. He also shows that the Free French seemed less interested in rallying France's exiled masses than in recruiting a "few good men," blindly loyal to the task of buoying DeGaulle. The British, as described by Atkin, leaned on the language barrier and stereotypes about French insubordination to defend their unwillingness or inability to enlist these fighting men into active service.

Perhaps more crucially, turning exiles of a fallen army and navy into resistance fighters in a rebel cause (DeGaulle) and asking them to serve in an enemy armed service (the British) fell upon obstacles written into international law. The demobilized French servicemen fell into a legal limbo of sorts. Some supported Vichy, France's legitimate government. Others judged the war over. Trade agreements between Britain and France prohibited the British from conscripting willing sailors and refugees into British war industries. French women refused to work in British munitions factories, expressing the fear that they would assemble the same bombs that would fall on French compatriots. Also, because the Vichy government did indeed claim legitimate international status, many sailors feared a charge of treason if they joined with British ratings. Atkin presents these important challenging problems and engages the reader, but in many respects leaves one wanting for more analysis of the larger implications for the conduct of the war that hinged on these failures to unify French personnel with British purpose.

Another constituency, well presented, but of seemingly little use to anyone, was the French consular staff which served the rump of the Third Republic and then Vichy. Atkin charges that the diplomatic core lacked the creativity required for navigating the newly carved diplomatic canals running between France and the UK. Cultural elitism and bureaucratic rigidity continued to structure European diplomacy even after World War I. Whether by intention or simply by the presentation of the evidence, Atkin offers a portrait of gentile incompetence, aristocratic posturing, and intellectual dullness within the circles of British and French diplomats. In an indictment against Vichy's last diplomatic

representative to London, Jacques Chartier, Atkin launches a typical barb, “The cream of the diplomatic staff had gone in July 1940, leaving those whose ambitions were clearly of a different level. They were not cut out for spying, for complex diplomatic exchanges or for political decision-making. They were at their best when form-filling and stamping passports” (p. 177).

Perhaps Atkin is correct in his indictment of Vichy’s envoys to Britain. But by the author’s own evidence, Britain had not given French diplomats much with which to work. Indeed they stoked DeGaulle’s flame, just enough to keep it burning, but not enough to cause the French colony to rally too strongly behind him. The RAF continued to destroy French towns along the Channel coast throughout the fall and winter of 1940–41, destroying some of the same residences from which French refugees in Britain had fled. The British could not imagine a way to integrate the French into their own continued resistance against the Germans until Vichy began to decline in popularity in 1942.

To Britain’s great credit, and unlike many other countries across the globe during this horrible tragedy (including France), the French did not spend the war forcibly detained in British internment camps.[2] Most sailors repatriated to France by 1941. Naval officers and de-commissioned diplomats, who refused to leave, lived well and enjoyed the occasional hospitality of their British counterparts. Most astonishingly, none of the French died due to state negligence. When interned or poorly housed, the French did not experience starvation, illness, or forced labor. The rule of law seemed to prevail. Perhaps some French casualties remain to be uncovered. However, Atkin attributes French survival success during this period to the fact that the majority of French men and women maintained a low public profile, unlike their accidental leader, General DeGaulle. Atkin’s book also shows that regardless of the chasm that developed between Vichy and Britain throughout the course of the war, Britain remained a very good place to be French and in exile. We can imagine that French workers who volunteered or who Vichy deported to forced labor camps (Service du Travail Obligatoire) in Germany later in the war would have happily traded their German jobs for idleness in the British Isles. As Atkin stresses, the “forgotten French” might well have deserved more dignified treatment than their British hosts offered. They were, after all, victims of Germany’s assault and veterans of an Allied army.

However, Atkin missed an opportunity to situate the experience of *The Forgotten French* within the broader international framework that structured belligerent states’ respect for, enforcement of, or indifference to, war refugees’ and captured enemy combatants’ human rights. Frequently host states or occupying powers completely abrogated World War II refugees’ human rights. With regard to the rest of the world, including the United States, Britain stood apart. The book has much to offer the reader in terms of retrieving details about diplomatic negotiations between the Free French, the British and Vichy. The author should not let his readers forget that while Britain hosted France’s exiles, she also continued to wage battle with a formidable enemy, then, closely aligned with the authoritarian French regime. In many ways, Atkin’s story of *The Forgotten French* is more of a success story than the author wishes to acknowledge. Historians have a responsibility to criticize and critique the imperfections of policies of the past. They should also feel a strong motivation, when appropriate, to highlight historical policies and practices that, at the very least, offer the foundation for policy models that might actually work. Ultimately Nicholas Atkin helps us to remember, and thus helps to nurture, Britain’s tradition of cautious, but tolerant respect of suspected enemies living within her borders during times of crisis. It is a fragile tradition that all warring countries must try to embrace in these newly trying times.

NOTES

[1] Tammy M. Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Proctor discusses how the 1914 British Aliens Restriction Act, the 1911 Official Secrets Act, and the 1914 Defense of the Realm Act (DORA), served as the legal tools for detaining and imprisoning foreign women living on British soil, or British women married to foreigners suspected of spying during World War I.

[2] Atkin, p. 228. Atkin discusses concentration camps, but adds that most internees were free to come and go. A few individual cases such as “nurse Nicole” (p. 228) and Robert Frank, who the British imprisoned on Isle of Man for revolutionary and anti-fascist activity, were treated as prisoners rather than as concentration camp victims in the continental sense of the term.

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