

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Zaretsky. *Nîmes at War: Religion, Politics, and Public Opinion in the Gard, 1938-1944*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. xi + 276 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-01326-8; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-01327-5; \$28.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-01126-4; (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-01127-1.

Reviewed by R. Wesley White (University of South Carolina)
Published on H-France (August, 1997)

Nîmes at War, a revision of the author's dissertation at the University of Virginia, is a worthy addition to the work being done on Vichy France. With the few reservations outlined below, the book will be of interest to all advanced students of France during World War II. In the tradition established by John Sweets, in his *Choices in Vichy France: The French Under Nazi Occupation* (Oxford, 1986), Robert Zaretsky challenges the weighty questions and broad assertions of established historiography using the experience of one *departement* (the Gard) in southern France from 1938 to 1944. More specifically, Zaretsky aspires to "suggest certain readjustments" to Robert Paxton's religious and political model of France during World War II as well as to inspire questions concerning the nature and nuances of resistance and collaboration (p. 6).

The author's general framework leads to a first observation, or question rather, regarding the work. Why was the Gard important in France's experiences during World War II? The author begins to address this question in the introduction, but never explains exactly why one should find the Gard worthy of an entire monograph. Is it because it represents all of France in some way or because of its status as an anomaly? We never find out in the text. Some general comparisons to other departments might have been helpful. This question seems all the more important considering another author has addressed the Gard in its wartime context. Zaretsky dismisses the work of Armand Cosson, *Nîmes et le Gard dans la guerre 1939-1945* (Horvath, 1988) as chiefly narrative and without scholarly apparatus. Cosson is a departmental correspondent for the *Institut d'histoire du temps present*.

This initial difficulty aside, Zaretsky does make a case

for some revision of Paxton's religious model. In particular, the author challenges Paxton's assertion that by the early 1900s a common enemy, socialism, had supplanted divisive religious issues between Catholics and Protestants. Zaretsky emphasizes that religious differences still divided the two communities in the Gard (p. 5). The author enumerates many instances from the late 1930s to the end of the war when underlying tensions broke out into open hostility. Most of the flames were fanned by what appears to be an "old guard" of priests in the church hierarchy. The main spokesman for this old guard was a certain Bishop Jean Girbeau. His invective could be read in the press and heard in his sermons throughout the war years. For example, Girbeau, in the Catholic journal *La Semaine religieuse* (October 1941), stated that the world could be divided into "unbelievers, heretics, and Catholics" (p. 94). Zaretsky links these and other public statements with the initial Catholic character of the Vichy regime to make a good case for a very nervous Protestant population in the Gard. This population was also reticent to support the regime. One has only to read the bishops' pronouncements to sense the tensions which must have been present in mixed Catholic and Protestant communities.

Zaretsky's first chapter studies Gardois reactions to the events of the late 1930s with careful attention to the difficult issues of subsequent years, such as Protestant and Catholic reactions to outbursts of anti-Semitism (for example, *Kristallnacht*) and those on the right wing who asked that France be rejuvenated or remade in a certain image. Starting in the late 1930s allows the reader to trace important trends from their interwar antecedents until 1945. Zaretsky's attention to these trends makes it easier to see why the Vichy government and many of its policies

were initially accepted and even revered by some parts of society. His examples support the view that Vichy was, in many ways, a continuation of prewar French politics and not an alien, political aberration. Protestant and Catholic reaction to *Kristallnacht*, the author deftly points out, foreshadow the reactions of each church to anti-Semitic policies in France during 1942. The Protestant community reacts with loud indignation to events in Germany and later to the *rafles*, or roundups of Jews in 1942. On the other hand, Catholics, at least in their public pronouncements, were much more reserved on both issues.

As far as revising Paxton's analysis of when Frenchmen stopped supporting Vichy, Zaretsky sets out to prove that popular disaffection with the regime and with Philippe Petain was "more widespread and precocious than suggested by Paxton" (p. 6). In this endeavor, Zaretsky is less successful than in the realm of religion. Firstly, he does not tell the reader in the introduction exactly where his interpretation differs from others who have treated the question of when Vichy lost its support.

Secondly, as far as chronology is concerned, the reader finds out later in the text that there are two important dates in Zaretsky's argument: October/November 1940 and August 1942. The author states: "By November [1940] a watershed had been reached" and "the seeds of doubt had been planted... as to the wisdom of Vichy's political program..." (p. 88). The author bases his argument on public reactions to Vichy's statute against Freemasonry, Hitler's Montoire meeting with Petain, and the first anti-Semitic laws. In each case, the public's response seems to have been apathetic, not reticent. The author himself states that the statutes against Freemasons and Jews met with very little, if any reaction. He also makes the statement that the public probably interpreted the anti-Freemason statutes as "necessitated by the circumstances" (p. 83) and the anti-Semitic measures as an "unfortunate but necessary measure" (p. 85). Although the author certainly does not intend to state that the public believed that the Jews and Freemasons were a threat to the state and therefore warranted these measures, his argument seems to suggest this possibility. The reactions to Montoire as well elicit nothing but apathy from the public.

One additional point speaks louder to the issue of Zaretsky's October/November watershed than does his cumbersome argument. He admits that his source materials for the period surrounding the turning point are limited. He states that there is a "paucity" of police re-

ports and an "absence of *rappports sur la morale publique*" for October and November (pp. 81 and 85). In addition, one of his major sources in the press, *Le Journal du Midi*, appeared only irregularly throughout the watershed period (p. 81, n. 77). The lack of sources leads the author to argue "from silence" that the meeting at Montoire and "the marshal's subsequent call to France to follow him down the path of collaboration," was greeted by a "deeply dubious audience in the Gard" (p. 225). It is difficult to see how anything can be extrapolated from silence and lack of source materials. Furthermore, it seems that with the acceptance by default of the anti-Jewish and anti-Freemason policies, which occurred just before Montoire, the average Gardois had already begun to be led by Petain, although blindly, toward collaboration.

Zaretsky's argument on his second important date, circa August 1942, also suffers from similar documentation problems, but is ultimately more assuring. The author argues convincingly that the Protestant communities of the Gard were most likely to resist the regime before 1942. With the combined effects of the "Joan of Arc Affair," when the public and the regime clashed over how to celebrate a Joan of Arc day in the spring of 1942, and the first roundups of Jews in August, Protestants, at "both official and popular levels," began to hide Jews and help them escape (p. 255). At this point, the Catholic community, although not yet at official levels, also began to resist. The early summer of 1942 also witnessed major public demonstrations on 14 July that directly defied government authority. Finally, a "common point of resistance" was created by the regime in 1943 with the creation of the *Service du travail obligatoire* (STO) (p. 257).

Zaretsky's last endeavor, to inspire questions on the nature and nuances of resistance and collaboration, meets with modest success in the case of the former and somewhat less success in the latter. The author does give the reader a broad view of the various behaviors exhibited by citizens of the Gard. He details both moral and physical resistance to the regime. For example, he uses anonymous letters that criticize government actions and policies, and he addresses *Maquis* bombings to support his case. He is careful to draw distinctions between bands of resisters and groups of STO evaders without making moral judgments. In some cases, however, the author's generalizations negatively effect his otherwise well-nuanced portrait of the average Gardois.

Zaretsky's analysis of collaboration is less delicately argued. It is clear from some of his language that his sympathies lie with the resistance. It seems he could have

been somewhat more objective in many of his characterizations. For example, he describes some collaborators as “mercenaries” without providing examples of how or if these people personally benefited from collaborating (p. 197). However, the characterizations he uses when describing a family that looted farms under the guise of *Maquis* activity or his descriptions of those who used the *epuration* to settle old scores are much more reserved (p. 237). Furthermore, his description of the activities of those collaborators who carried out their tasks to the very end as “akin to the spasms of a rabid, dying animal” goes beyond what some would consider quality scholarly discourse (p. 207). Beyond semantics, research in the archives at Fontainebleau shows that the *Legion des volontaires francais contre le bolchevisme*, one of the five major collaborationist groups in France, had a recruiting office in Nimes. Zaretsky mentions no Legion activities.

With the exception of the first chapter, which relies heavily on the press, the author makes impressive use of primary sources. He combines police and public opinion reports, day-to-day, departmental, bureaucratic correspondence, Catholic and Protestant newspapers, and the general press to develop his interpretation. His occasional comments on their reliability are informative and important. Despite the impressive use of French source materials, the author neglects to use German documents. The German Security Services would have files detailing many of the incidents described by Zaretsky. A comparison might reveal more interesting details not reported in French records and further strengthen Zaretsky’s conclusions. German military intelligence records would be very useful in studying resistance in the Gard and would indubitably give better facts on numbers killed and wounded in raids and battles than do the French reports.

The lack of German records and the indelicate nature of his interpretation of collaboration do not taint Zaretsky’s otherwise useful monograph. Its main importance is that it gives scholars a chance to see the way in which people react to war and shows the nuances of behavior during defeat and triumph.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

Comment by Robert Zaretsky:

I wish to thank Professor White for his review; my book would certainly have been stronger if it had incorporated his observations concerning German sources.

But let me try to respond to a few of his other comments. First, I agree that my analysis of popular support is “less successful” than that of the religious issue. As White notes, this is largely due to the paucity of archival material. But he seems to amalgamate two different points that I make concerning arguments based upon silence: one concerns the public response to Montoire, the other the Protestant response to Vichy’s policies. As for the former, he asserts that my major source of information was the sputtering *Journal du Midi*, but it is, in fact, *Le Republicain du Gard* (which, unlike *Le Journal*, was appearing on a regular basis) which served as my principal source (furthermore, it was backed up by references to *L’Eveil du Gard*). As for the latter point, I attempted to argue that the Protestant journals’ silence on the policies of Vichy, and their muted response to Petain, are significant when compared to the logorrhea of the secular and Catholic press on the same issues. White telescopes the two discussions—one on pp. 81-82, the other in my conclusions on p. 255 (and not, as he notes, p. 225). There I do conclude that the Gardois were “deeply dubious” about the policy of collaboration symbolized at Montoire. I should have qualified the warning that I was “arguing from silence” (for I was actually arguing from the articles in the secular press). The reviewer has the right to express reservations about my conclusions, but his claim that “the reactions to Montoire... elicit nothing but apathy from the public” requires evidence. If he has documentation, I would like to see it. If not, I maintain that my reading of the press is closer to the truth. Moreover, in regard to the issue of silence and its interpretation, he might wish to return to my examination of the Protestant and Catholic presses, and reconsider if all cases of silence are the same, regardless of context. For what it is worth, and as I note in my book, the local representatives of Vichy were very troubled by this same silence: clearly, they did not consider it an expression of apathy.

Second, White states that my book should have included references to other local studies of public opinion. Rather than multiplying such references in my work, I instead decided to refer to the synthetic studies on public opinion by Pierre Laborie and Jean-Marie Flonneau. I regard this as an adequate basis for my comparisons, while White presumably disagrees. But he ought to acknowledge that I do offer such a basis.

Third, White criticizes the absence of any discussion concerning the recruiting office for the *Legion des volontaires francais contre le bolchevisme* (LVF) in Nimes. This is true (the documentation I found amounted to a couple

of police reports of negligible interest), but his contention that I make no mention of their activity is inaccurate; I direct him to pp. 102, 149-50, and 203. I am grateful for his reference to the holdings at Fontainebleau, and would be happy to learn what he has read there.

Fourth, White is troubled by my violation of “quality scholarly discourse” in regard to the issue of collaboration. In support, he cites my comparison of the activity of collaborators in the last months of the war to that of a “rabid, dying animal.” Well, I agree that it is not Michelet, Macaulay, Febvre or Cobb, but I tried. I would only point out that, in the spring of 1944, the collaborationist groups were on their last leg (i.e., dying) and that they were guilty of many, many senseless, bloody and savage acts (i.e., rabid). This leads to White’s consternation over the “indelicate nature” of my treatment of the collaboration, and his concern that my sympathies are showing beneath the robe of historical objectivity. As for his suspicions, I confess: I do prefer the resisters to the collaborators (in this regard, I am probably not alone among historians of contemporary France). But does this mean that I have violated the canons of historical objectivity? Readers may look at my discussion of resistance activity after the liberation of the Gard, as well as in the months leading up to it, and decide themselves.

More generally, this raises the inevitable issue of the nature of historical objectivity. Very briefly, this notion can be understood from two perspectives: that of the relationship between the historian and his/her material, and that between the historian and his/her readership. As for the former, I did my best to examine and explain the actions of the collaborators (and resisters). Concerning the latter, it is true that I did not succeed in disguising my sympathy for some of the actors. If, in fact, historical objectivity is simply a narrative technique (see Robert Connor’s brilliant discussion of this issue in his work on Thucydides), I agree that I fell short.

The matter does not end here. White first states that my language is “indelicate”, and then subsequently declares that my “*interpretation*” (italics are mine) is so. I agree that style and substance cannot be entirely divorced one from the other, but I also believe that they are not identical. If it is my language that frustrates White, in particular my description of some of the *miliciens* as “mercenary,” I would answer that “mercenary” is a fair appraisal. The *Milice* was well-fed and provided for in a time of extreme distress and scarcity, and the *miliciens* materially profited from their numerous excursions against foreign and French Jews. By 1944 there were, of course, ideological or pathological causes, along with sheer practical causes (i.e., too late to turn one’s coat) for continued membership in the *Milice*. Yet mercenary motivations also are clearly operative. But as far as the “indelicate nature” of my *interpretation* of “collaboration” goes, White does not, as far as I can see, offer any substantive arguments.

One last point: White writes that I “dismiss” the work of Armand Cosson. I am afraid White is now committing a linguistic indelicacy. He is quite right that M. Cosson is the departmental correspondent for the *Institut d’histoire du temps present* (as White may have learned from my book). But he is wrong that I “dismiss” his work, which is acknowledged and utilized in my book (as are, with his kind permission, the photos for the book’s cover). I direct the reader’s attention to the long note on p. 127, where I discuss this issue. It is there that I point to the limited time frame of his book (imposed upon him by the publisher, Horvath) as well as note that M. Cosson bypasses the religious character of the events, which my work treats as a principal theme. In conversation, M. Cosson has acknowledged the importance of that dimension; I only wish White had given it more attention in his review.

Robert D. Zaretsky Honors College University of Houston rzaretsky@uh.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/>

Citation: R. Wesley White. Review of Zaretsky, Robert, *Nimes at War: Religion, Politics, and Public Opinion in the Gard, 1938-1944*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1215>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.