

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Donna F. Ryan. *The Holocaust & the Jews of Marseille*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996. vii + 266 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06530-9.

Reviewed by Robert J. Soucy (Oberlin College)

Published on H-France (January, 1999)

In *Vichy France and the Jews* Michael Maurus and Robert Paxton presented an overview of Vichy's complicity in the Holocaust. Donna Ryan, by focussing on Marseille, France's second largest city, confirms many of their conclusions while adding much new information and valuable perceptions of her own. Her in-depth research (including into hitherto inaccessible documents), lucid writing, measured analyses, and attention to both the specific behaviors of key individuals and the general attitudes of different cultural groups in Marseille make her study local history at its best.

According to Ryan, regional studies of Vichy can show how complex and varied the World War II experience was, and Marseille may present a worst-case scenario regarding the actions of local French officials. Few of these officials ever took issue with Vichy's persecution of Jews, and even prefects like Joseph Rivalland and Marcel Lemoine who clashed with the Germans over other policy issues were never suspected by the Germans of protecting Jews. Ryan writes: "In virtually every case in which top level Marseille authorities had some discretion about helping Jews, they remained silent or cast obstacles in the way" (p. 210).

Some low-level bureaucrats and police did help Jews at great risk to themselves but, as Ryan emphasizes, they were the exceptions not the rule and were greatly outnumbered by the vast majority who simply did their job. "No representative of the government ... publicly opposed any measures directed at Jews until the deportations began. Most material help and rescue came from foreign sources, which faced French government obstructionism and an official policy of persecuting Jews" (p. 174).

Maurice Roidellec de Porzi, the Marseille police intendant from 1940 to 1943, despised the Germans but supported Vichy's ideological goals (including that of "a Catholic France ruled by a tiny elite") and supervised the roundup and deportation of local Jews with vigor and brutality. Indeed, as one victim remembered, "it was bet-

ter to be interned by the Germans than by the French" (p. 160). Even after Vichy lost its bargaining power with Hitler in November 1942, French collaboration in persecuting Jews continued on both the local and national level—this at a time when fascists in Italy and Spain were trying to save many Jews fleeing Vichy. In Nice, Italian occupation authorities interceded with the French prefect on behalf of Jews, and when Italian troops retreated after Mussolini's fall many Jews followed them.

Although Ryan believes that few French officials or private citizens "fully" comprehended what awaited Jews who were shipped "to the East", she notes that as early as the fall of 1942 "high level officials undoubtedly had seen reports of what deportation actually meant" (p. 208). Moreover, official explanations about labor camps in Poland or Jewish colonies in the East "surely rang hollow as police loaded women, children, the elderly, and the infirm onto the trains and split up families before departure" (p. 215). The conditions of transport and the fact that deportees were seldom heard from again should have been revealing. Knowledge of Zyklon-B was not necessary to understand that something horrible was happening.

The motives of those French men and women who helped track down Jews in hiding or carry out the deportations ranged from high-minded support of Vichy's "spiritual" revolution to sheer greed. Some of the perpetrators welcomed the chance to appropriate "aryanized" Jewish property. Indeed, keeping the spoils of anti-Semitism in French rather than in German hands was one of the benefits of French "sovereignty" which Vichy sought to defend. Thugs from Marseille's underworld received 1,000 francs per Jew caught, plus whatever they could steal or extort from their victims. Writes Ryan: "There were always bands of [French] informers, headhunters, thieves, and murderers on whom the Nazis could depend to maintain a steady stream of Jews to fill the convoys" (p. 203).

Nor did most of the population of Marseille show

much sympathy for the victims when Vichy began implementing its *statut des juifs*. In 1940 and 1941, there was little evidence of any widespread disapproval of Vichy's anti-Jewish laws, while letters of denunciation revealing the whereabouts of Jews in hiding were not uncommon. In 1940 anti-Semitism in France took on a new twist when the high incidence of Germans and Austrians among Jewish refugees allowed some French to feel that they were exacting revenge for their military defeat by punishing these "enemy aliens"—a case of the victims of Hitler being condemned for being compatriots of Hitler. It is true that in 1942, in a curious application of "family values", there was a public outcry in Marseille against deportations splitting up Jewish families (earlier deportations of intact families had provoked no such indignation).

During the crucial years between 1940 and 1942 when Vichy began interning foreign Jews and depriving French Jews of their civil rights and livelihoods (as well as laying the bureaucratic background for its complicity in the Holocaust), few non-Jews in Marseille questioned the morality of these actions. There was not a single public demonstration in defense of the victims in Marseille or the Bouches-du-Rhone—even though there were street demonstrations protesting food shortages in these areas and in dozens of other departments from 1940 onward. In the North, thousands of coal and textile workers struck on behalf of their economic interests, and throughout France, including in Marseille, thousands of outlawed demonstrations occurred on Bastille Day. But the confiscation of Jewish property, the arrest of foreign Jews, and the eventual deportations themselves produced no such protests—even though many French were shocked by the brutal way Jewish women and children were herded to the cattle cars. Previous measures separating Jews from the mainstream of French social, economic, and cultural life evoked barely a murmur. "In Marseille," Ryan notes, "the bureaucracy droned on, the police did their jobs, and most people did nothing to intervene" (p. 220).

Proclaimed guardians of the moral order in France, including the leadership of the Catholic church, took no public stand against Vichy's treatment of Jews before 1942. In 1940 and 1941, when church support was essential to Vichy, the French episcopacy raised no objections to government decrees which attacked Jews politically, socially, and economically and deprived foreign Jews of their liberty. Ryan's explanation? "The France Petain promised was simply too attractive to the church hierarchy to risk an open breach" (p. 218). Only the deportations of 1942 brought objections from some church leaders and even these were accompanied by expressions of allegiance to Petain. Monsignor Jean Delay, who

protested the cruel manner in which the deportations were being carried out, prefaced his pastoral letter with the comment that France did indeed have a Jewish problem, adding that the state had the right to defend itself against those who had "done harm" to it. As late as 1944, Delay condemned the Resistance and presided over the funeral of Philippe Henriot, the anti-Semitic voice of Radio Vichy, who had been assassinated by the *maquis*.

Ryan does not ignore that the individual Catholic priests and nuns, even entire orders such as the Dominicans, hid Jews in their monasteries and convents, helped them obtain forged baptismal papers, and facilitated their escapes to the border—even though one of these, a Capuchin priest, Father Pierre Marie-Benoit, was recalled to Rome in 1943 when he tried in vain to enlist the Vatican in the effort to rescue Jews in Nice. Many other lower clergy, however, were closer to the Vatican than to Benoit, convinced as they were that the choice was between Stalin and Hitler, atheistic communism or authoritarian anti-communism.

Although Ryan does not use such terms, she makes it clear that the age-old dynamic of viewing "the other" as more expendable than "one's own kind" was an all too common reaction under Vichy—not only among non-Jews but among many Jews as well, especially among many French Jews who thought that the distinction between themselves and foreign Jews would save them from deportation. For a time, Vichy agreed, cooperating fully with the Germans in deporting foreign Jews and only objecting when the Germans began to demand French Jews. As German pressure increased, Vichy increasingly caved in. In 1941, Vichy regarded a handful of highly assimilated Jews as worthy of being called French, while systematically downgrading all other Jews to second-class citizenship. In 1942 Pierre Laval and the Germans agreed on a hierarchy of deportables: German and Austrian Jews first, then other foreign Jews, Algerian-French Jews, and finally, reluctantly, French Jews. Since Vichy accepted German convoy quotas, it fully understood that saving one person meant damning another. By 1943 Vichy had dropped the distinction between French and non-French Jews, hoping that its cooperation with the Nazis would benefit the vast majority of the population who were not Jews.

Between 1940 and 1943, one government-sponsored Jewish organization in France favored some Jews over others. This was the *Union generale des Israelites de France* (UGIF), an organization created by Vichy initiative to help locate (and eventually persecute) all Jews in France. In return for its help, the UGIF was allowed to

dole out small subsistence payments to Jews who risked being known to the authorities. Raymond Lambert, the Jewish director of the UGIF, supplied Vichy authorities with a monthly list of the names, addresses, ages, professions, and gender of all Jews his organization had aided, but he expected that UGIF staff members would be excluded from deportation. Lambert protested vehemently in 1943 when Vichy arrested some of his staff, only to be arrested himself soon after and—along with his wife and four children—deported to Auschwitz where they all died. A few days before his arrest, Lambert rejected assimilation as the path for Jews in the future and placed his hope in Zionism. As Ryan points out: “This from a man who days before had consoled and distracted himself by reading biographies of Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Rabelais, Montaigne, and Balzac” (p. 199). In 1944 a Doctor Cremieux, the former dean of the Faculty of Medicine in Marseille, whose family had lived in France since the thirteenth century, followed Lambert to Auschwitz.

In 1940 and 1941, few French Jews in Marseille demonstrated much brotherhood or sisterhood for non-French and non-Mediterranean Jews. They found the influx of German or Yiddish-speaking Jews disconcerting, while hoping that thoroughly Frenchified Jews like themselves would not be deported. They also looked down on Kabyle Algerians in the Jewish population as members of a despised North African culture. Even though many Algerian Jews were long established in Marseille, they were eventually deported in numbers twice as large as their percentage in the local Jewish population. When foreign Jews became scarce and Nazi deportation quotas increased, they were among the first to be sacrificed. Ryan believes that had Jews in Marseille been less divided, they might have organized, during the first months of Vichy at least, a more effective response to their common enemies.

Not everyone behaved so ethnocentrically, including certain Gentiles. Besides the Catholic priests and nuns already mentioned, a number of Protestants, bureaucrats, and police risked their lives to obey their consciences. Among them were August Boyer, a guard who helped a few Jews escape deportation and was arrested and tortured at the hands of the French police; the police captain Dubois who alerted escape organizations when their clients faced imminent arrest; Madame Rodrigues, the secretary-general at the Cassis town hall, who repeatedly helped Jews obtain false papers and refuge; Antoine Zattara at the Marseille prefecture who used his position to help many Jews escape the Nazi dragnet in 1943 only to be arrested and deported himself in 1944. Ryan comments: “Few Jews, especially foreigners, escaped de-

portation and survived the war without help from some courageous person willing to risk his or her liberty by breaking the law to follow the dictates of conscience ... Much credit must be given to those who could see beyond their own everyday problems in a defeated France, with steadily deteriorating material conditions, to extend a hand to a stranger” (p. 174).

Between 1940 and 1943, various rescue and relief organizations—many run by non-Jews—also attempted to aid the victims of Vichy’s escalating campaign: the Emergency Rescue Committee, the American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee, the International Red Cross, the YMCA, and the Unitarian Service Committee (the latter aiding Spaniards interned in France since the civil war as well as Jews). Some of the German authorities were even sympathetic to the Quakers and the Red Cross, remembering their help to Germans after World War I. Fearful that Vichy might expel them from France for helping Jews, these organizations made no concerted effort to alert world opinion to what was happening in France even though they knew that a grim fate of some kind awaited the deported. Some YMCA personnel apparently indulged in denial in 1942 when they loaded cartons of books, many of them Christian tracts, onto cattle cars carrying Jews.

Not only did Vichy create all kinds of bureaucratic difficulties to prevent Jews from emigrating between 1940 and 1943 (despite its official message of wanting to rid France of Jewish influence), but the American State Department forbade its consulate in Marseille to issue entry visas without first receiving the exit visas that Vichy balked at providing. One of the few American bureaucrats who put humanity above career was the U.S. Vice-Consul in Marseille, Hiram Bingham Jr., who ignored Washington’s directives and helped hundreds of desperate Jews escape. Ryan does not say what professional price, if any, Bingham paid for this insubordination, but she does make clear that top officials in the State Department had little sympathy for Jewish immigration.

It is interesting how French and German authorities in Marseille and American State Department officials in Washington often justified—or attempted to justify—their anti-Jewish actions on anti-leftist grounds. When the Germans launched a massive roundup of Jews in 1943 at the Old Port in Marseille, they claimed that only Communists and criminals were their targets, and the controlled French press dutifully reported the arrest of 6,000 Communists and criminals. Presumably, Vichy felt the local population would find this fiction more palatable than the truth. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Breck-

enridge Long opposed the admission of all foreigners into the United States who held “radical” political views, among whom he included most Jews. Central European refugees between 1938 and 1939 were depicted as rabid anti-Nazis and warmongers who threatened the fragile peace created at Munich.

A curious twist to the principle that some Jews were more expendable than others was practiced by Varian Fry, the head of the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), who worked out of Marseille. Fry regarded Jewish intellectuals, artists, and scientists as more worthy of rescue than ordinary Jews. Fry, a young Harvard classicist who spoke fluent French, saved some one thousand Jews, including Max Ernst and Marc Chagall, but had difficulty at times deciding what constituted a genuine artist who deserved to live. The historian Fritz Ringer has commented: “From among crowds of young intellectuals and artists gathered somewhere in Western Europe, somebody (Varian Fry) was sent to rescue the top two percent, or five percent, or whatever; the object was to pick the best ones. One sees the dreadful image of somebody saying: ‘Bring me your folder of art, and if I think it’s good, we can save your life’” (p. 145). Ryan adds: “The premise that lives of the intelligentsia were more valuable than other lives did not seem to raise moral questions for Fry, his coworkers in France, or his colleagues in New York” (p. 146). Indeed, Fry was scornful of the Quaker relief organization for lacking such discrimination: “Their task is mass relief, and they can’t really tell an intellectual or a genius of genuine value from a faker” (p. 146). Rodellec du Porzic, the French intendant in Marseille, expelled Fry and the ERC from France in 1941 after calculating that such an action would have no negative repercussions on Franco-American relations. The fact that State Department officials distrusted Varian Fry’s organization as too sympathetic to leftists, even though it was ERC policy to refuse aid to Communists, may have eased this sell-out.

Jews in France who fought in the armed Resistance were often Zionists. During the first two years of Vichy, Zionist farm cooperatives in France and the Jewish Boy Scouts of France were training grounds for later Jewish fighters in the maquis. By October 1943, some fifteen different Jewish combat groups operated in the south, engaging in sabotage and other acts of military resistance. If these actions proved that not all Jews were lambs led to the slaughter, they remained, according to Ryan, the work of a few, of individuals who were mainly young, leftist, and Zionist. Nor did the Jewish Resistance in Marseille focus its actions on specifically helping Jews;

none of their sabotage was aimed at stopping the deportation convoys. By the time the Jewish Resistance called upon others to act, Vichy had identified the whereabouts of thousands of Jews and had incarcerated many, while most of those who escaped arrest, especially refugees, were too impoverished and demoralized to respond to the call.

Are there any lessons for the present and future to be derived from Ryan’s findings? Ryan does not answer this question, at least not directly. I wish she had, if only briefly. No doubt it is risky business applying conclusions from one historical context to another, and this should be approached with caution. Still, even extreme historical relativists might concede that Ryan’s book demonstrates the danger, for oneself as well as for others, of succumbing to callous ethnocentricity which can be exploited by those who wish to divide and conquer. Certainly, in the case of Marseille under Vichy, “identity politics” had its down side, even for insiders, including those who regarded some insiders as outsiders. On the other hand, does the fate of Lambert, the Jewish director of the UGIF, demonstrate the futility of assimilation and buttress the case for Zionism, or should different historical circumstances lead to quite opposite, to quite anti-Zionist, conclusions?

One lesson suggested by Ryan’s book is that history from the bottom up must not be separated from history from the top down, at least where the behavior of most Marseille police under Vichy was concerned. Writes Ryan: “It would seem that the individual leadership at headquarters, especially in the office of the intendant, played a critical role in determining the relationship between local police officers and Vichy, the Germans, and the Jews” (p. 204).

Finally, I would have liked to know what kind of background, upbringing, education, ideas, and experiences helped make a Hiram Bingham, Jr. and a Breckenridge Long (or is it just that some people are genetically endowed with more human decency than others?). But, then, even an attempt at dealing with such a question might require another book or more. The book Ryan has written is quite enlightening as it is and accomplishes what it sets out to do with great skill, insight, and analytical sophistication.

Copyright 1999 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 H-France list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Robert J. Soucy. Review of Ryan, Donna F., *The Holocaust & the Jews of Marseille*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2649>

Copyright © 1999 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.