

Nadine Fresco. *Fabrication d'un antisémite*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999. 797 pp. 180FF., paper, ISBN 978-2-02-021532-9.

NADINE
FRESCO
FABRICATION
D'UN
ANTISÉMITÉ

LA LIBRAIRIE
DE L'UNIVERSITÉ
DE PARIS

Reviewed by Samuel Moyn

Published on H-Judaic (April, 1999)

Paul Rassinier invented Holocaust denial, or "negationism," as it is known in the France of his birth. "Until his death," Nadine Fresco observes near the end of her new biography, "Rassinier spent most of his time and energy trying to get people to talk about him" (p. 571). By 1967, the year in which Fresco opens her book, at his graveside, Rassinier had not met with success: at his funeral only a coterie of malcontents, mostly aging fascists, came to pay their respects to the deceased. But then Rassinier found a posthumous disciple, Robert Faurisson, one among others who were to be remarkably faithful to his vision, even if more successful in propagating it. Beginning with the decision of *Le Monde* in 1978 to publish Faurisson's arguments that the gas chambers were legendary, Rassinier, like Faurisson who expounded him, became notorious in France, almost a household name.

Annie Kriegel once suggested that Pierre Vidal-Naquet, the author of famous attacks on denial written mostly during the understandable controversy that ensued, had done exactly what Rassinier and his followers most desired: he had

talked about them.[1] Fresco herself, almost twenty years ago now, published a mocking article in *Les Temps modernes* in which she likened the quality of the revisionist "arguments" to the moral and intellectual standard set by the liar who, standing accused of breaking a pot he had borrowed, offered the mutually contradictory arguments that he had never borrowed it; that, even if he had, someone else had broken it before him; and that, in any case, he had returned it in perfect condition. In other words: they were arguments that would have been laughable, were they not so hurtful.[2] But Rassinier had finally succeeded in getting others to talk about him, Fresco among them. Would he have been delighted at the time and energy she must have devoted to researching and writing her first book, this massive, erudite, fascinating study of his life?

Fresco begins her inquiry with an uncompromising dismissal: when she picks up the thirteen books that made Rassinier a cult figure in certain quarters, a series beginning with *Passage de la ligne* of 1949 and ending with *Les Responsables de la Seconde Guerre mondiale* of 1967, she can-

not find them worthy of study.[3] The books fall from her hands, out of disgust at an antisemitism only weakly disguised by argument. In 1996, Florent Brayard published a revised version of his doctoral thesis as *Comment l'idée vint à M. Rassinier: Naissance du revisionnisme*, an analysis restricted to Rassinier's evolution as reflected in precisely those books that Fresco will not read, along with some important unpublished correspondence dating from the same period. In justifying her rival approach to Rassinier, Fresco is relatively harsh about Brayard's work. Forty-three years old when he published *Passage de la ligne* and a longtime member of the socialist party, Rassinier had spent years involved in left-wing politics, followed by a deportation experience in the camps of Buchenwald and Dora that left him close to death and ill for life. So he proclaimed at every opportunity, and so his followers established his biographical credentials when passing him off as an objective authority. For Brayard, how a man with these experiences and a long record of pacifism had come to his aberrant views remained a mystery; Rassinier's "case," so Vidal-Naquet, Alain Finkielkraut, and others had also ruefully concluded, seemed fated to remain one.

Fresco is a more stubborn detective. By the late 1940s, in her view, Rassinier the antisemite had already been fabricated; it is worthless to follow his activity after he began trying to retail the product. He became predictable and, on some level, boring. Hence Fresco turns to the unknown beginning and middle of Rassinier's life rather than the end, to solve the mystery rather than to leave it intact. "An understanding of him during those twenty years presupposes an analysis of how he had gotten there," she explains. "Rassinier before Rassinier." In those four decades of anonymous formation, she writes, Rassinier had been "a man without importance. Which is why I found him important. He had also been a man without interest. Which is why I found him interesting" (pp. 69, 72). She talks about him—over almost six hundred pages of text and almost two hundred of dense

notes. But she talks about the past he obfuscated, the fabrication of the myth of himself that continued to be repeated even by his enemies, the construction of an antisemite rather than the content of the antisemitism. "The relationship is close, and fundamental, between the negationist enterprise and the hagiographic fiction growing out of Rassinier's self-revision," Fresco contends (p. 571). She writes a life to expose his counterlife.[4] And he would not have greeted the results.

Her core argument is simple. Personally devastated with the reality of the first forty years of his life—disappointed many times, then definitively after the war—Rassinier tried to make a fantasy of that reality for the last twenty. But Rassinier's fantasy occulted a very specific reality: Belfort, the small "Territory," as it is known, nestled between Alsace and the Franche-Comté, that he practically never left. Fresco begins and remains in this laboratory, the all-important matrix for the synthesis of Rassinier's hatred. This approach promises to contest Rassinier's carefully-managed image and ensures that practically all of the information in her book is new. However, it also raises problems, for the material available about Rassinier, until the end of the war, is exceedingly scarce: the basic facts about his personal life, the rare letter and, above all, articles scattered in the local political newspapers which he frequently edited. Fresco's tactic is to make up for a record unsurprisingly thin given an unimportant man by saturating it with large doses of context. This choice, in turn, means that as many as thirty pages can pass without Rassinier appearing in his own biography. But when he does reappear, the background information most often does prove a suggestive key to his development.

In the first half of the book, it is Rassinier's political affiliations that Fresco uses both to structure and to power her narrative; after a section on Rassinier's childhood come chapters on his traumatizing, decade-long membership in the Communist party; on his brief and abortive

search for third way; and, finally, on his definitive commitment to the socialist party through the end of her study. The second part of the book turns to the critical two years between Rassinier's return from deportation and his departure from Belfort--a departure that inaugurated the process of "self-revision" that propelled him into his negationist career.

The highlights of the first part of Fresco's book are easiest to recapitulate thematically by stressing the premonitory threads of negationism. Fresco sees informing every stage of Rassinier's otherwise protean evolution. Aspects of both the content and form of his engagements--their ideological substance and their rhetorical style--were reagents necessary for a later chemical reaction.

There was, first of all, the antisemitism she sees exposed to him at every turn, beginning at home and in church. In 1906, before the restitution of Alsace-Lorraine to France in 1918, Belfort remained France's last redoubt. Fresco finds it suggestive that Rassinier grew up in an atmosphere of extreme patriotism as the child resident of a region on the border of France irredenta. Rassinier joined the Communist party in 1923 at the age of seventeen at the beginning of the period of "bolshevization," after the attempt to keep the left together in the aftermath of the October revolution had come to nought at the Congress of Tours. In analyzing Communist rhetoric and images of the time, Fresco perceives in the vituperative attack on capitalism an antisemitic message subliminal but deadeningly constant. The violence and disappointment of his expulsion from the party, which took place in part because of the homosexuality of his mentor, made Rassinier an ardent anticommunist and pacifist, so much so that when the thirties began to wane he affiliated with Paul Faure's (rather than Leon Blum's) wing of the socialist party during the split over the acceptable extent of appeasement. The antisemitism that informed opposition to Blum in France as a whole is well-known, but it also proved an ele-

ment of the factionalization of own party. The socialists following Faure were often, Fresco shows, tempted to blame the coming war on Jewish finance and bolshevism. Rassinier's pacifist anti-communism led him--along with his faction--not only to greet Munich but to slide into accommodation with the Germans as of 1940. During the initial years of the German occupation, Rassinier, like most other Frenchmen, lived with the regime and the racist persecution it embraced. Fresco observes that even once he did join the Resistance in 1942, as the local press agent of a Parisian student organization, Rassinier published their denunciations of German treatment of Jews with the qualification that the "Jewish question" still remained open. The very use of the phrase "Jewish question," Fresco states, documents an "ambiguity" characteristic of the Resistance as a whole, one that provides yet another ideological continuity through Rassinier's trajectory (p. 419).[5]

And with this content, there came form. Fresco documents in *L'Humanité*, the paper which Rassinier read constantly and reworked for local consumption during the critical first ten years of his political life, "a kind of denunciation that will resurface, much later, under Rassinier's pen, long after he had severed his relations with the Party" (p. 184). She argues, throughout her meticulous reconstruction of Rassinier's twenty years of engagement from his adhesion to Communism until his deportation, for a gnawing quest for personal legitimacy that always came to grief. His repeated attempts to achieve a leadership role in his own party were always blocked by superiors; his eventually megalomaniacal will to prominence in his own region, notably in a local election in the pre-war period, never once found satiation. Rassinier reacted to these defeats with a predictable rhetoric in matters large and small: denunciation of others and revision of himself. Fresco notes a constant, defensive, self-protective revision of personal history, small in scale though it may

have been at first. It is a rhetorical maneuver Fresco sees as a harbinger of things to come.

Fresco offers, in sum, a retrodictive approach to Rassinier's early life, in which the inevitable end of the story determines what seems noteworthy in and foreshadowed by the beginning. But how did the various elements she finds come together in the end? Fresco produces her answer in the excellent chapter on Rassinier's return from deportation. Already during the war, Fresco shows, Rassinier predicted a notable position for himself in the region thanks to his Resistance activity (mainly clandestine publishing) in 1942-3. But he came back from Dora too late to secure it, fatally late. There were five elections that followed--for mayor and two constitutional assemblies, among others. But Rassinier lost every time he ran. Briefly, he did achieve his "ineluctable destiny," as he described the Belfort deputy's seat he occupied for two short months--but only because he inherited it, after the socialist party had called in someone else from Paris to win it after Rassinier's humbling string of defeats (p. 475). And then Rassinier lost climactically, in his desperate attempt to keep the seat to which he had never been elected. He lost all of these elections to a Jew: Pierre Dreyfus-Schmidt, a prewar nemesis whom Rassinier came to treat more and more fantastically the more his resentment at life consumed him. He concentrated all of his personal disappointment on this rival, a mere individual soon expanded, distorted and collapsed into his "clan" according to the antisemitic rhetoric Rassinier increasingly adopted in his public encounters. "I will say today," Fresco cites him as writing in his party newspaper, "that I have always tried to keep the problems of Judaism and antisemitism from taking centerstage in electoral debates. M. Pierre Dreyfus-Schmidt does not feel the same way and he is making the Jewish question the main theme of his articles... The day when he succeeds in separating the residents of Belfort into two clans, the semites and the anti-semites, into the Jews and those against the Jews,

he will have to live with the results. For the time being, he is trying to transform his newspaper into a Wall of Lamentations" (pp. 476-77). And as it became clearer that Rassinier would lose, this style of rhetoric became only a tame beginning.

Fresco puts great explanatory weight on this decisive period in Rassinier's construction. "If Paul Rassinier had received at the ballot box the legitimacy that he desired from his home," she infers, "if his immediate community had granted him through their votes the title of mayor or deputy, then Holocaust revisionism would have had to find a different founder." The chapter, masterfully plotted by Fresco according to the unities of classical tragedy, is so convincing, so definitive where the others were suggestive, that a reader could wonder why it does not suffice on its own as an explanation for the resentment that Rassinier came to translate into negation. In a way, it does. "None of these elements," she explains of the harvest of the years before the war, "would have coalesced into the antisemite that he became were it not for the political failure that followed his return from deportation." With the catalyst present, the accumulated weight of Rassinier's life "made the failure the moment of the crystallization of all of the elements, which would otherwise have remained inert his entire life" (501-3). There is her thesis. Defeated, Rassinier moved away from Belfort after forty years of accumulated failure. Forty years of biography which he would revise, indirectly through the revision of history.

Does Fresco's biographical key turn or rattle in the lock? While responses to this question will vary from reader to reader, it is hard to imagine anyone writing a superior book based on the same evidence. The key certainly turns most of the way. Rather, the two main objections that the book invites would impugn neither her argument nor her impressive research but the historiographical significance she assigns to them. The book aspires, first, to fairly ambitious generalizability. It is meant to answer the question, posed

on the cover and in the text, of how antisemites are made (pp. 69, 71). But as Fresco notes at every turn in her account, with regard to every explanatory context she adduces, only Rassinier out of all the people from his region, parties, and camp became the founder of denial. She wishes to situate negationism "in the long history of antisemitism" (p. 66). The individualized portrait is certainly able to stress the recent history of the phenomenon, notably left-wing contexts for twentieth-century antisemitism familiar from J.L. Talmon's very general conception of the phenomenon and Zeev Sternhell's more specific argument for the French case.^[5] Even so, the book is not really nomothetic in providing a widely applicable answer to the question of how antisemites are made as it is idiosyncratic in explaining a single case, indeed an eccentric one. Rassinier broke a mold. While Fresco unquestionably succeeds in dispelling much of the mystery surrounding Rassinier's life, it is unclear why her solution makes him much less bizarre a figure than he seemed before she wrote. Fresco might not intend it, but it is possible to interpret her book--and to render her title in English--as a study in the "construction of *one* anti-semitite." This understanding, truer to the results of the book, inevitably restricts their generalizability.

And then there is the question of how deep the connection is between Rassinier's constitutive revision of his past and the broader negationist revision of history. Fresco proceeds like an epidemiologist, tracing a plague back to the first reported case, as if understanding how it started is the most critical fact, as if, arrested at the point of mutation, the new virus could never have spread. But no matter how important, the origins are not, as she implies in justifying her project, the only interesting aspect of negationism. She is, for this reason, somewhat unfair to Brayard's work. The negationist ideology also underwent important transformations both in Rassinier's series of books and in the uses his followers made of them. As Fresco herself illustrates, the denial of the exis-

tence of the gas chambers almost does not appear in Rassinier's first book, so that later aspects of his development--for example, his hatred of David Rousset's once canonical interpretation of Nazi barbarism--remain critical for understanding and Brayard is persuasive in emphasizing them (pp. 62-5). And beyond the peripeties of Rassinier's later evolution, the importance of the founder himself should not imply that the networks and agents of diffusion from the source lack all interest. Without them Rassinier would have remained a cipher and Fresco would have never written her book. Both Rassinier's revision of himself and the negationist revision of history were mendacious and involved a common rhetorical pose, but does this mean that the explanation of the one counts as the explanation for the other? Or are they really only distantly related problems? Fresco is correct about the gripping interest and significance of her masterful account of origins. But her achievement does not reduce the rest of the history of denial to a repetitive epilogue. There were whole chapters that followed--chapters that were evil, but not banal.

Notes

[1]. Vidal-Naquet's major contributions are collected and translated in *The Assassins of Memory*, trans. J. Mehlman (New York, 1992). See more recently Vidal-Naquet, "Qui sont les assassins de la mémoire?" in *Réflexions sur le génocide: Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent III* (Paris, 1995) and A. Wiewiorka, "Pierre Vidal-Naquet face aux 'assassins de la mémoire'," in F. Hartog, P. Schmitt, and A. Schnapp, eds., *Pierre Vidal-Naquet: Un Historien dans la cité* (Paris, 1998).

[2]. "Les redresseurs de morts," *Les Temps modernes* (June 1980): 2150-2211.

[3]. He had announced another book as forthcoming, with the title *Histoire de l'Etat d'Israël*, but it never appeared. The most recent chapter in the history of negationism is the publication by the ex-Communist Roger Garaudy of *Les Mythes fondateurs de la politique israélienne* (Paris,

1996). After an important Catholic figure lent it public support, it sparked a high-profile controversy. See, for example, P.-A. Taguieff, "L'abbé Pierre et Roger Garaudy: Négationnisme, antiju-daïsme, antisionisme," *Esprit* (Aug.-Sept. 1996): 205-16.

[4]. Compare G. Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (New York, 1995).

[5]. Compare the recent controversy over Jean-Paul Sartre's study *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. G.J. Becker (New York, 1947). Since it also features the phrase "Jewish question" in the original French title, some authorities now perceive a similar antisemitic "ambiguity" at the heart of Sartre's attack on antisemites. See *October* 87 (Winter 1999), notably Pierre Birnbaum's contribution.

[6]. Fresco is also deeply influenced by the general interpretive spirit of Philippe Burrin's well-known studies of interwar politics and the occupation years. See Burrin, *La Dérive fasciste: Doriot, Déat, Bergery, 1933-1945* (Paris, 1986) and *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise*, tr. J. Lloyd (New York, 1996).

Copyright (c) 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 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 network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Samuel Moyn. Review of Fresco., Nadine. *Fabrication d'un antisémite*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2956>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.