

# H-Net Reviews

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Michael B. Miller. *Shanghai on the Metro: Spies, Intrigue and the French between the Wars*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. xiv + 448 pp. \$35.00 US (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08519-0.

Reviewed by William D. Irvine (York University)  
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Years ago, in some now forgotten archive, I came across a byzantine story involving the assorted desperate (not to say deranged) schemes of a would-be police informer, hoping to intercept the mail of someone who may or may not have been a royalist agent. Since the story told me nothing that I wanted to know about my subject, it never made it into my carnet. I have always regretted this, because the tangled tale did tell me quite a bit about the real world of police spies.

Michael Miller did not make this mistake, and his *Shanghai on the Metro* delves deeply into the bizarre world of spies and international intrigue in the years between the two world wars. This is a book about spies, but much else as well. “[C]rooks, con-men, charlatans, arms dealers [and] traffickers” (p. 159) make memorable appearances on these pages. The line between the respective under-worlds of secret agents and criminals effectively dissolved during these years; all were part of a more or less clandestine milieu of intrigue. War, revolution, and global reordering meant that there were few parts of the world where agents of various French secret services did not struggle with their counterparts from both Western and Eastern Europe. In 1918 Europe was awash with assorted adventurers, military desperados, and political refugees, all readily available for work as drug dealers, gun runners or spies. Criminals of every variety were prepared to lend (or more accurately sell) their services to one or (often) more secret service. Refugees from Russia, Germany, Italy, or Eastern Europe provided a constant stream of agents, double and even triple agents.

Miller gives pride of place in this panoply of characters to the ubiquitous White Russians who crop up every-

where as taxi-cab generals, soldiers of fortune, assassins, political intriguers, and, legendarily in the case of Shanghai, prostitutes. The White Russians obviously fascinate Miller as, I suspect, they will most of his readers. Nor are the simple adventurers immune from the seduction of foreign intrigue; the famous *Croisiere jaune*, whose expedition through central Asia captured Europe’s imagination in 1931, began under the careful tutelage of the intelligence section of the French *Deuxieme bureau*.

What we have then is a vast canvas depicting just about every aspect of intrigue and adventure in the 1920s and 1930s. Parts of the book read like something taken out of the *Boys Own Annual*. But it is a tale told by a professional historian with a solid grasp of the archival sources (such as they are) and a seasoned skepticism about the veracity of his sources, be they official or not. In many ways, this book ought to be required reading for all aspiring authors of historical spy novels. Of course the author is acquainted with this genre too. He devotes a large section to the fictional and journalistic accounts of interwar spying and the manner in which the exotic, romantic, and dangerous world of Shanghai became accessible to the poor Parisian drudge wearily making his way home on public transportation. Whence comes the book’s title.

This remarkable book has a number of strengths. Miller has read deeply in a wide range of archival collections in France, but also in Germany and the United States. Better yet, he has a good eye for what archives do and do not reveal. The book is peppered with astute observations about the workings of French intelligence services and their agents, as well as those who have subsequently preserved (or not!) their records. Prospective

researchers should not set foot in an archive without first immersing themselves in these pages. Miller is also an engaging storyteller, which is just as well because his story is dense and complicated; it is rather like having the plots of all of Len Deighton's novels compressed into one volume. Mysterious figures, about whom nothing much seems to be known for sure, enter on the stage and then leave without a trace. But the attentive reader is rewarded by Miller's lucid and often delightfully ironic prose. No one, for example, should miss his dry observations about the practical advantages and limitations of the preferred substance for making invisible ink.

What has all this to do with interwar France? At times, not very much. France disappears for large stretches at a time while the author treats us to the intricacies of Shanghai's foreign compounds or the fate of various expeditions in the Gobi desert. There are extended (albeit unfailingly interesting) disquisitions on the relative merits of different ocean-liners, transcontinental trains, and international hotels. But Miller insists that his book also speaks to that frustratingly illusive subject: the "mood" of interwar France. Contrary to so much that has been written, he argues, France between the wars was not in the grip of anxiety, insecurity, and despair; "decadence," so often evoked, did not characterize the period. The French were on a more even keel: they had retained their sense of humor, as well as their sense of perspective, and they were prepared somehow to muddle through. Miller may very well be right on this point, but it is not at all obvious that this conclusion follows from his subject matter. The incontestable popularity of the spy and adventure literature seems to indicate that France still loved a good yarn; the authors of these stories did perhaps "displa[y] a curious ability to stand back and write about the world in detached, playful ways all the while exuding a sense of living with great events in an historical epoch" (p. 237). From this point to generalizations about the "national mood" of the period seems like something of a stretch.

On one issue, however, Miller makes a telling argument. One of the black marks of Edouard Daladier's 1938-40 government was the internment of refugees fleeing fascist Europe. Not only did these actions belie France's tradition of providing a refuge for the oppressed, but, some historians have argued, they suggest that the repressive and racist mindset of the Vichy regime was in place among French officialdom long before the collapse of 1940. Armed with a confident "feel" for the police culture of the period, Miller presents a sensitive and nuanced dissent. Never denying the very real hu-

man tragedy involved, the author argues nonetheless that the internment policy was not merely the consequence of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and authoritarian reflexes. Some of that was there, of course, but so too was a good deal of concern for and sensitivity to the plight of the refugees. Their massive influx did present French authorities with an enormous problem, because it was inevitably the case that some small percentage of them were foreign agents, spies, or potential saboteurs. The internments of 1939-40 were not the republic's finest hour and probably contributed little to national security. But they did not necessarily reflect some national "decadence," or prefigure Vichy either.

Except for the question of the internments, I suspect that few readers of *Shanghai on the Metro* will feel compelled to revise their views about interwar France. However, even if I am right, it does not matter very much. Miller has written a book that will delight both those who care about France between the wars and many of those who do not.

Author's Comments from Michael Miller Syracuse University <mbmiller@maxwell.syr.edu>

I can recall a conversation some twenty years past with Alfred Chandler and Tom McCraw on the subject of author response. Never, Chandler said, write a reply to a critical review. The reviewer has the last word. You always lose. This is the kind of advice you don't forget, so when Michael Carley asked if I would write a comment to an upcoming review of my Shanghai book and I said yes, I wondered if I had been a fool to do so. I am grateful, therefore, to Bill Irvine for having got me off the hook. Such a favorable review by a historian who has done distinguished work on the period may make my day, although I fear the ineluctably blander reply that will follow may not do the same for the readers of H-France. I especially appreciate the careful reading he has given the book and his effort to convey its full compass, a matter I will return to below in the second point of this comment.

The first point and—perhaps surprisingly for French historians—the less important of the two has to do with my argument about interwar France. So that there is no confusion I should begin by pointing out that nowhere in the book do I deny the troubles of the French nation in the thirties, nor do I ignore the nastier, vicious side to spy writing. In fact, as I mention in my introduction, I originally thought I would argue the conventional perspective. But I was also taught that you go to archives to dis-

cover interpretations, not to raid them to force through preconceived notions (Eugen Weber has a brilliant line about this and looking through the yellow pages), and so when the trend of what I was reading tended to conflict with how I had come to think about the period, I was thrown into a quandary. At first, in the early eighties, I wrestled with the problem and sought to work around it. Eventually I realized that this would not work and that an alternative way of looking at these years better fit the material I was turning up. The result was the argument about a more self-assured France, a nation more comfortable with its century than we have been told was the case.

Professor Irvine suggests it is quite a stretch to read a national mood into the history of espionage and espionage literature. Here, of course, I would differ since espionage struck at the most vital issue of the day: security. It was also about fascism and communism and refugee politics. Because contemporaries were fascinated with spies, how they wrote about them, would most likely say something significant about how they thought about the world they were living in. My guess is that anyone picking up this book without knowing anything about it would assume it showed how images of spies were representative of a national mood of vulnerability, xenophobia, and alarm. The fact that I present mostly evidence to the contrary should set off at least some alarm bells about our accepted notions for thinking about the period.

I was very pleased that Professor Irvine devoted a paragraph to my section on internments and liked what I wrote, since I was initially afraid that reviewers would gravitate to this controversial issue and reduce it to polemics, rather than address it with balanced consideration. To my surprise, most of the early reviews have passed over it altogether. Equally surprising has been how little has been said about my discussion of the market in World War I books and the conversion of the war experience into a commodity, even though this too breaks with standard interpretations. The larger point is not unimportant to my interpretation: that the conversion throughout these years of contemporary history into entertainment or romanticism reveals a present-mindedness that did not dwell only on danger and decline but instead enjoyed playing with big history and making it the source of satisfying sensations. This, to me, reveals a certain ability to cope and command. Irvine and I might divide on this perspective, but I am again pleased that he called attention to it.

I do not mind if people disagree with me about French

moods in these years as long as they are prepared, like Bill Irvine, to engage my interpretation rather than to dismiss it without first comprehending how and why the argument has been made. I remain no less drawn to the darker, less appealing face of the thirties and I admire no less books that argue that side. What I would like to accomplish in this regard is to widen the debate, to direct it toward the multiple dimensions of interwar history, to restore to the French their imaginations, and to write without looking back from 1940. Interestingly, recent exchanges on H-France suggest that I am not alone in believing this should be done.

But my argument concerning interwar France is not primarily what the book is about, so the second part of this comment is the more important one. The principal purpose of the book is to write about change, about the First World War as a dividing line in history, and to use the history of espionage as a means of doing so. The central question of the book is why the milieu and literature of intrigue altered so dramatically with the First World War. I am asking what greater developments coming out of the war produced richer, more complex spy worlds and spy stories. Thus the real themes of this book are larger twentieth-century histories introduced with the war: the history of greater globalization, of adventure and travel, of more intensive organization, of refugee politics, of present-mindedness and consumerism, to mention the most prominent. As a French historian, I consider it my obligation to locate my study within the wider national historiography, to show how my material either confirms major interpretations or forces us to re-think them; and I must admit to increasing impatience with books that are simply plopped into French history without ever writing about it. As a result, I made the above argument about interwar France an integral part of the story I was telling. But this was a spin-off from a deeper desire to get at the distinguishing characteristics of the age.

My favorite chapter in the book is the last one, which covers more than a hundred pages of text and takes up the themes of globalization, travel, and adventure. I think this is where the book becomes most imaginative and original. It is the chapter that best satisfied my desires to push the subject matter to its fullest extension, to pursue the widest potential, that initially drew me to the topic without losing sight of the basic connections. And it is the section that offered the fullest scope for storytelling that was my way of journeying back into history and recapturing for readers (and myself) the atmosphere and styles of these fascinating years. In fact if I had to choose one passage from both the books I have written that I

wanted most to be read, I would opt for the section on the history of adventure, especially the long discussion and narration of the *Croisiere jaune*. So again I am gratified by Bill Irvine's review of my book, because he has comprehended what I set out to do and, despite interpretive differences, has read and appreciated it on its own terms.

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