France: The Gray Years

In the years since Robert Paxton decisively shattered the official French myths of the Vichy period with the publication of *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (1972), scholars have nuanced and expanded our understanding of the Vichy regime.[1] A general scholarly consensus prevails on the French origins of the policy of collaboration, the mirage of a “double game” played by the Pétainist state, and the democratic legitimacy of Vichy, which, rather than representing a right-wing coup against the state, was legally created by the vast majority of the members of the French parliament and initially appealed to a large number of French politicians across the political spectrum. Perhaps the most important aspect of this consensus concerns the principal role of the French state and its forces, under the rubric of the “National Revolution” and under the cover of the German occupation, of initiating and implementing the persecution of a host of designated domestic enemies including Gaullists, Communists, Freemasons, and Jews.[2]

Richard Vinen’s book is the latest in a long line of post-Paxton monographs on the French response to the occupation and the official state policy of collaboration. Scholars who focus upon the social history of the Vichy period and the daily lives of those who lived under the German occupation tend to soften the hard political dichotomy between resisters and collaborators.[3] Like “resistance,” “collaboration” is an elastic term. Official state collaboration differed from the collaboration of fascists and right-wingers who clustered in occupied Paris, the collaboration (or accommodation/adjustment/cohabitation) of those who were forced to billet German troops and endeavored to feed their families during a time of severe scarcity and rationing, the so-called horizontal collaboration of French women who engaged in sexual relations with German soldiers, and so on. Collaboration differed with respect to social class, status, and region. Those in the occupied zone, of course, had an entirely different appreciation of life under the Germans than those who lived in the unoccupied zone, the forbidden zones, or portions of France annexed by Germany. Moreover, just as many who initially supported the French policy of collaboration grew disenchanted with Vichy by the fall of 1940, not every collaborator of late 1940 remained loyal to Vichy for the duration of the regime. The nature of the German presence in France changed after the occupation of the southern zone in November 1942 and the eventual arrival in France of brutalized Nazi forces from the eastern front.

In many respects Vinen’s history of life under the occupation is independent of most political studies of occupied France. While not denying the importance of Paxton’s work, Vinen writes that “a sharp dichotomy between the ‘myths’ that the French believe about themselves and the ‘realities’ that historians dig out of the ‘archival bedrock’ may work for those who study the high politics of the Vichy regime ... However, when we turn to the history of French society, there is not one reality and not one myth. There were numerous sorts of experience and numerous ways in which people interpreted and remembered that experience” (p. 3).[4] Vinen’s concern is with those in the lower strata of society, who were “unfree” in the sense that they “did not join de Gaulle in
London," and who were “governed by circumstances beyond their control” (p. 2). In his opinion, these marginal members of the French state have been more or less overlooked by academic historians, who emphasize the war or Vichy politics and thus “often neglected the very issues that the bulk of the population talked about” (p. 4). The book focuses on the six to eight million refugees who fled the German advance in 1940, the almost two million French prisoners held in Germany during the occupation, the 600,000 young men called up after 1943 by the Vichy state for mandatory labor service under the Service du Travail Obligatoire plan (STO), wives of prisoners of war, poor women who volunteered for service in Germany, peasants, criminals, and those forced to deal on a daily basis with German troops in the occupied zone. Vinen offers a synthesis of the mass of scholarship on occupied France published during the past twenty years, the many official memoirs and autobiographies, and the limited amount of primary source material for his groups of choice, whose members tended not to write on the scale of politicians and intellectuals. He writes, “I have little new to say about Vichy itself. More generally, I do not see my approach as a particular reaction against any other group of historians,” and admits that his book “is in no way complete or definitive” (p. 5).

Vinen describes the summer of 1940 as a “No Man’s Land” in which state structure and the ordinary social networks vanished, information and knowledge were driven by rumor and innuendo, and all semblance of normalcy was destroyed.[5] He observes that “in some ways, historians who ‘demythologize’ the period actually move us further away from understanding it because people’s perceptions and actions were so heavily influenced by false information. False information affected political views” (p. 373). During this time of exodus, as waves of refugees flooded the roads, French soldiers sometimes assaulted French civilians, especially young women. Regarding the common assumption that German troops were on the whole well behaved towards the French (with the obvious exceptions of designated enemies like Jews and Communists), Vinen argues that while “it is true that the Germans were less brutal in 1940 than they were in 1944 and that their invasion of France was less brutal than their invasion of Poland or the Soviet Union… the Germans were not gentle in 1940” (p. 24). The situation improved once the armistice was signed and the rules of collaboration had been promulgated. Vinen refers to the experiences of Jean Moulin, who in many respects is representative of the tangled French reaction to defeat and occupation. As Prefect of the Eure-et-Loir department, Moulin attempted suicide in June 1940 after being beaten by German soldiers. He recovered, was accorded much better treatment by local German officers, and carried out the official Vichy policy of collaboration spelled out in the armistice. Like other officials with left-wing records, Moulin was dismissed by Vichy in November 1940 and joined the Resistance; he was ultimately tortured to death by the Gestapo. As Vinen correctly observes, “those who stayed at their post too long, on the other hand, could eventually become regarded as collaborators” (p. 34).[6]

Vinen acknowledges the difficulty of tracking French opinion towards Vichy, noting three generalizations drawn by other scholars. First, French people differentiated between Pétain and the Vichy government. Second, loyalty to Vichy varied by area and was very much driven by the presence or absence of German troops. Vichy thus “was most popular amongst those people whose attachment to Marshal Pétain was not sullied by any direct experience of what was happening in France,” a state of mind that extended to parts of the French empire and even to the Canadian province of Quebec and the editorial pages of the political newspaper Le Devoir. Third, while it is difficult to track a single trajectory of French opinion, by 1941 the overall trend was towards disenchantment with the regime. Even so, Vinen concludes that “sometimes the most pressing constraints in people’s lives did not come directly from Vichy, or the Germans at all but were mediated through French society” (p. 372). He points out that unemployment, rather than political affiliation, drove many members of the “lumpenproletariat” to volunteer to work in Germany. Especially vulnerable in 1940 were workers in light industry or those who had recently entered the workforce, along with women, foreigners, and young people. A sizable number of criminals also volunteered for service in Germany. Similarly, many men were pressured by their families, rather than the state, to fulfill or escape the mandate of their STO obligations. Class and rank also affected the status of these lower orders; prisoners of war from the top echelons of French society have garnered the attention of historians while those of lower status, who in many cases were “transformed” into civilian workers, are not part of the French memory of the occupation. Vinen argues that “the complexity of ‘freedom’ in wartime France is illustrated by the fact that post-war authorities so often condemned those who had ‘volunteered’ to work or fight for the Germans. Yet those who ‘volunteered’ were often drawn from those groups who did not enjoy full freedom even in the purely legal sense of the
word and whose ‘real’ freedom was even more limited by poverty, isolation or lack of information” (pp. 370-371).

"Horizontal collaboration" resulted in the birth of approximately 50,000 to 200,000 children.[7] Like others who discuss the savagery of the post-occupation period, Vinen highlights the fact that women who had their heads shaved (the femmes tondues) tended to belong to lower social ranks and often were singled out for treatment based upon long-standing local grievances as well as their suspect behavior during the war. Wealthy women like Coco Chanel had the means to leave the country until the worst of the Liberation excesses had passed; not many local women had the opportunity or the panache to utter the famous line of the actress Arletty, who explained her behavior during the occupation with the disarmingly simple sentence, “my ass is international, my heart is French.”[8] Vinen wryly remarks that “no Frenchman had his head shaved for sleeping with a German woman,” even though many French prisoners and workers engaged in such relations (or even the more innocent relations amicales with German women) and had been punished by the German state (pp. 301, 303). Vinen takes issue with some of Philippe Burrin’s assertions on the overwhelming role of women in denunciations during the occupation, but concludes that perhaps these were, for a short amount of time, “revenge that underprivileged women were able to take” (p. 181).

Vinen suggests that on the whole French prisoners of war did not suffer on the scale that has been imagined, since most prisoners were assigned to Kommandos in factories or farms, did not live behind barbed wire, and “often lived without guards and without obvious signs of their captivity” (p. 184). He emphasizes the multiplicity of experiences for the general category of prisoners of war. Class and military rank determined whether men were placed in Oflaggs or Stalags, or sent to Kommandos. Prisoners above the rank of colonel were placed in the prison at Königstein, while French colonial troops were singled out for particularly brutal treatment. Lower ranks, however, tended to be imprisoned for the longest amount of time; many of these men were held for five years and often welcomed home as less than heroic figures.

Regardless of their political sympathies, during the occupation many French citizens came to be obsessed with food. While admitting that the French did not suffer as much as populations in the Soviet Union, Poland, Holland, or Greece, Vinen argues that “if dearth did not have the very sharp physical effects that it had in other occupied countries, it certainly had a cultural and political effect in France,” and that “shortages created a new sort of society” (p. 215). In keeping with his general theme, Vinen stresses the fact that hunger was regional; cities suffered more than the countryside, and different zones experienced various degrees of privation. Even so, he concludes that “it is misleading to look too hard for winners in occupied France. German requisitions, loss of imports, absence of men in prisoner of war camps and declining efficiency all meant that there was less of almost everything. In these circumstances, most people were losers” (p. 245).

Most historians identify the major turning point in popular opinion towards Vichy as the February 16, 1943, implementation of the STO. Vinen shares this opinion, arguing that “for the first time, Vichy had an obviously malign effect on the lives of millions of French people, not just on those who left but on those who endured risk and hardship in order not to go, and on the relatives of both these groups” (p. 247). Vinen’s larger argument is that the STO did not in fact “mark the beginning of compulsory labor in Germany. Workers who ‘volunteered’ for work in Germany during the first two years of the war had often been subjected to various forms of compulsion” (p. 249). Some young men were able to defer or escape service, while others were driven into the Maquis. Vinen concludes that the French reaction to the STO “shows how resistance, collaboration, passivity, and Pétainism always overlapped” (p. 277).

Like other scholars Vinen underscores the continuity between Vichy and the pre- and postwar state of France. His interpretation of the Liberation of France and the initial postwar period mirrors his account of the exodus: “just as 1940 did not mark a sharp break in these people’s lives, 1944 did not always bring liberation ... the purge that accompanied the liberation created whole new swathes of people whose freedom was restricted in some way” (p. 371). Vinen further argues that just as “for many French people 1940 did not mark a sharp break between freedom and oppression but rather a stage in which constraints that had existed before the war were intensified,” there were “institutions in which the same people remained in place throughout the period from, say, 1936 to 1946,” and that, for the underprivileged groups that are the focus of the book, there were “certain respects ... in which Vichy policy continued that of the Third Republic and was continued by the governments of the Fourth Republic” (pp. 370-371).

Vinen declares that his book is not an apologia, nor
is it “intended to pass judgement on the French,” since it represents “an attempt to understand and evoke the circumstances that governed how people behaved” (p. 11). Of course readers will judge for themselves, as they did with Marcel Ophuls’ groundbreaking documentary film Le Chagrin et la pitié, which had a first, severely limited, Parisian release in 1971 and famously allowed its subjects to damn themselves with their own words. One is tempted to counterpose Marc Bloch, another hero of the resistance, with Jean Moulin. Bloch, a world-class scholar who had experienced the antisemitism of the French academy in the interwar period, had to petition the Pétainist state for exclusion from its anti-Jewish statutes, and during the occupation was squeezed off of the masthead of the Annales journal so that it would appear to be an Aryan publication. It surely says something about the period that it was the STO, and not the persecution of Jews, that caught the attention of most French citizens and turned them in large numbers against Vichy.

Vinen could perhaps have more strongly emphasized the French role in the excesses of the period. Many historians, including Vinen, agree with Richard Cobb’s assertion that “even the Gestapo would have been largely ineffective had it been deprived of the willing services of its spare rib, le Gestapo français.”[9] This is a fundamental point in the history of Vichy and the occupation. By the time of the liberation, Joseph Darnand’s Milice had over 35,000 members, a number that should be compared to the roughly equivalent 40,000 German troops stationed in France in 1942 for the purposes of maintaining order. Vichy took the initiative of passing antisemitic legislation in the late summer of 1940. French police rounded up those excluded from new French state, and French police guarded the notorious camp at Drancy. French functionaries and police were responsible for the deportation of Jewish men, women, and children; of the 75,721 mostly “foreign” Jews deported, only 2,500 returned, and 4,000 died in French camps.[10] While the excesses of the National Revolution originated in Vichy and the collaborationist circles of Paris, these policies required the active participation of members of the public. Buying food on the black market was one thing; denouncing neighbors and turning a blind eye to the murderous policies of the state was another matter entirely. Even “attentisme,” the wait-and-see policy of many French citizens, played into the hands of the persecutors. There is a certain ultimate irony to the fact that for all of the Vichy government’s rhetoric about acting as a shield for the French while persecuting domestic enemies of the state, the Vichy government was unable to return to Paris. The city itself was only spared destruction, against Hitler’s orders, by the last-minute decision of the German military commander of Paris, Dietrich von Choltitz.

Overall Vinen has provided a riveting series of snapshots of various aspects of French life under the occupation. While he does not break much new interpretative ground, and while his chapters dealing with the high politics of Vichy are somewhat perfunctory, his book offers a masterful synthesis of the secondary literature on daily life under the occupation.

Notes


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Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Robert Gildea, 


[5]. As Vinen notes, the term was initially employed by Simone de Beauvoir. Many political accounts of Vichy describe this state of confusion, as do a raft of memoirs by political actors and others. See also Olivier Wieviorka, Les Orphelins de la République. Destinées des députés et sénateurs français (1940-1945) (Paris: Seuil, 2001).


[7]. The lower estimates provided by Vinen are from German figures and the higher figures are from Jean-Paul Picaper and Ludwig Norz, Enfants maudits (Paris: Editions des Syrtes, 2004). See Vinen, 162.

[8]. As quoted in Jackson, France: The Dark Years, 335.

[9]. Cobb, French and Germans, Germans and French, 60.

[10]. Vinen discusses this matter on pp. 143-155. For the definitive account, see Marrus and Paxton, Vichy France and the Jews.

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