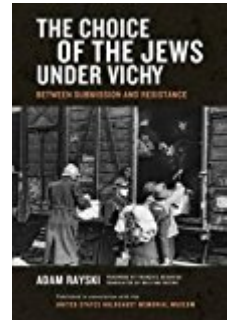


Adam Rayski. *The Choice of the Jews under Vichy: Between Submission and Resistance.* Notre Dame: University Of Notre Dame Press, 2015. 408 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-268-04061-1.



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Research on Jewish resistance during the Nazi occupation has increasingly become a topic in its own right in the international field of Holocaust studies. Adam Rayski's 1992 publication on French Jewish responses to the occupation has advanced this trend. After the initial English translation in 2005, *The Choice of the Jews under Vichy: Between Submission and Resistance* is now available in a paperback edition as well.

Interestingly, Rayski himself served as the national secretary of the Main d'oeuvre immigrée (MOI), a sub-department of the French resistance mainly consisting of immigrant Jews. He also headed the Jewish resistance organization Union des Juifs pour la Résistance et l'Entraide (UJRE). As an important former Communist resistance leader, he provides a unique first-hand account of the way Jews living in France reacted to persecution. However, although Rayski states that he recognizes the tension between the witness-actor and historian, the question is to what extent he, a witness himself, can actually fully distance him-

self from the subject the way a historian is obliged to do.

The strength of the book, particularly taking its original publication date into consideration, lies in its ability to portray Jews not as passive victims but as active resisters and to emphasize a collective consciousness of self-affirmation. Unfortunately, however, the author makes the same mistake of which he accuses his predecessors: as he positions those who joined the (armed) resistance on the "right" side of the spectrum, all Jews who were not involved in resistance activities are immediately perceived as having been too passive. Here lies exactly the problem of the work. The subtitle of the second part of the book—"to resist or to submit?"—clearly indicates that there is no room for the many gradations of behavior that existed between these two extremes. The author does not mention the external factors that might have withheld people from joining the resistance or going into hiding. In doing so, he ignores those who were not at all inclined to follow

Vichy or German directions, but in reality were unable not to do so.

Despite Rayski's overly positive analysis of the attitude of French non-Jews, the anti-semitic climate in France before and during the war undoubtedly contributed to the perceived impossibility for many Jews to go into hiding. Money also played a major role: to join the resistance and go into hiding you needed a substantial amount of money in order to take care of yourself and your family. The legal ways to obtain food were often no longer a possibility. For many, the financial situation simply did not allow an entire family to flee or go into hiding.

An important element that is lacking throughout the work is a socio-psychological perspective. Rayski has a harsh view of those who "remained deaf to all warning" and continuously underlines that people knew enough to be convinced of the extermination of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe (p. 132). "Knowing," however, is a tricky word to use in this context, as the information on unprecedented atrocities in Eastern Europe that did reach Western Europe throughout the war was often beyond belief, both to Jews and non-Jews. As a result, this information was blocked out, simply because they could not, and did not want to, believe that large-scale exterminations were carried out in the East.

It is not surprising that Rayski's analysis of the Union Générale des Israélites de France (UGIF, the French Jewish Council set up under the behest of the Nazi occupier) is damning. He uses a citation of Primo Lévi who wrote that "one MUST refuse [German orders], and one always can, in every circumstance" (p. 56). Rayski uses this notion to show his disaffection with the Jews who agreed on the establishment of the UGIF, without paying attention to the fact that the pressure from both the Germans and Vichy official Xavier Vallat through the Commissariat Général des Question Juives (CGQJ) was intense. In addition, he completely fails to mention that the UGIF leadership

initially collectively rejected the role they were assigned and the conditions they outlined before accepting their position. Raymond Raoul Lambert, whom Rayski unfairly singles out as antihero, had led the most important Jewish refugee organization before the war. From the outset, his main aim was to protect immigrant Jewry. Especially at this stage of the war (the beginning of 1942), the idea that the UGIF could fulfill an important social welfare role was still a realistic outlook. Also, many individuals within the UGIF eventually participated in clandestine activities and aided illegal organizations by passing on information and resources. Therefore, one cannot state that there existed a "deep rift" between clandestine and official organizations (p. 168).

Despite his awareness of the witness/historian tension, Rayski has thus not succeeded in distancing himself from the subject sufficiently. His approach is inherently moralistic. To be sure, the work also has its strong points. Taking the personal background of the writer into consideration, the book definitely adds value to existing scholarship. The analysis of the Consistory's willingness to remain loyal to French law, despite increasing anti-Jewish regulations is insightful. Also, although the level of detail at times is ineffectual, the fact that so many voices of individuals who fought for their lives are included in this work is a major accomplishment. The archival research that has been conducted is truly remarkable. Nevertheless, the outcome of this approach is that the book in part serves as a memorial book rather than a scholarly work. The author updated the 1992 original version of the text with new sources, both primary and secondary. However, this did not lead to a more balanced perspective on, among others, the functioning of the UGIF and other Jews who Rayski believes to have submitted to the Nazis. In doing so, he ignores important contributions of such scholars as Jacques Adler, Pierre Birnbaum, Vicki Caron, Richard Cohen, and Renee Poznanski. Still, Rayski's most important aim, to correct the image of France as "the coun-

try that along with Germany most persecuted Jews,” is to a certain degree achieved by his thorough account of the many resistance activities that were attempted (p. 319). Yet the accomplishment could have been greater if he had paid attention to the many gradations of resistance, also bearing in mind that many Jews simply could not participate in the resistance activities he rightly glorifies throughout the book.

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