



**Lindsey Dodd, David Lees, eds.** *Vichy France and Everyday Life: Confronting the Challenges of Wartime, 1939-1945*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 264 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-01159-5.

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“My God! What is this country doing to me?” cries a shocked Irène Némirovsky in one of the handwritten notes collected in the appendix of *Suite Française*.<sup>[1]</sup> Her country, France, rejected her when it became Vichy France. She was of Jewish origin, so she was arrested as a Jew under the racial laws that Vichy France implemented.

Vichy France *is* its everyday life: its traumatic impact on the French population, coping with unwanted occupiers and contradictory propaganda. Némirovsky’s manuscript is but one of the many historical documents attesting to life after France’s defeat in 1940 and the ensuing German occupation. Michel Foucault described it as “waiting for the dawn.”<sup>[2]</sup> Lindsey Dodd and David Lees’s *Vichy France and Everyday Life*, the outcome of a one-day conference they organized at the University of Warwick in March 2016, chooses to study this historical moment from the standpoint of “less well-known people (and indeed unknown people)” (p. 5).

This work is a welcome addition to other microhistorical efforts to address Vichy France through its people’s experiences and emotions. The authors of the book teach us something very important about agency: they argue that “human emotion” is worth studying as “a driver of historical change” (p. 9)—in particular, the emotions of

“unimportant, ordinary and historically anonymous people.” The authors also underline, following Michel de Certeau and Benedict Anderson’s scholarship, that the everyday experience cannot be reduced to “a mirror image of an event played out on the small-scale local level,” but, rather, encompasses “the interplay between the individual and his or her immediate society, the individual and his or her imagined community, the individual and his or her neighbour” (p. 10).

It is a matter of “shifting the lens” (p. 4) and “redirecting the gaze” (p. 2), the editors argue, in an already nearly saturated historiographical landscape. They take as inspiration Robert Gildea’s *Marianne in Chains* (2004), opposing it to Henry Rousso’s *The Vichy Syndrome* (1994) and works that focus exclusively on “grand narratives of resistance, collaboration, heroism and guilt” (p. 5). I would soften the contrast, for a couple of reasons. While a top-down approach would suggest looking strictly at the Vichy government and at Marshal Pétain’s policies, Rousso also argued for the importance of studying the impact of the regime on French society and people.<sup>[3]</sup> And regardless of Rousso’s work, the story of the French Resistance and of the Vichy collaboration with the Nazi regime is very much ingrained in the daily life of ordinary people who found themselves compelled to

make a choice after the French defeat in May–June 1940. This is the argument Guillaume Pollack, Vincent Houle, and I made in our *Frontières. Circulations, vie quotidienne, illégalités*, issued from a conference held at the Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University in February 2018, showing how the establishment of new Vichy borders after the French defeat meant disarray for the local population.[4] The French people reacted in different ways: some joined a resistance organization that fought for a common goal; others chose to collaborate with the Nazi regime—but most people adopted less clear-cut approaches in the gray zone between these two opposites.

Dodd and Lees's edited volume, like Vichy itself, could be summarized as a conflict between people's emotions and the regime's propaganda. Resistance to the latter came from unexpected places. Children (the protagonists of Camille Mahé's, Matthieu Devigne's, and Lindsey Dodd's essays) fought the regime's propaganda on their playgrounds and proved to be much less malleable than Marshal Pétain thought them to be. They were at the center of the rhetoric of his National Revolution, but Vichy's toys—idealizing the marshal as France's savior and conveying the only "true values" of the French state—became increasingly impossible to afford. So, most children played without the government-mandated toys, expressing themselves freely and communicating the anxieties and pain of the war. Propaganda specifically targeted struggling families through the "Secours National" (the object of Jean-Pierre Le Crom's chapter), Vichy's national charity whose purpose was actually to "manipulate public opinion" (p. 103). Yet, Shannon L. Fogg's research shows that even the middle class and "those who had previously lived comfortably" (p. 6) struggled because of the war: their emotions emerge through the documents of the Home Colony program, a charity established by the American Friends Service Committee. As Mason Norton shows, emotion could lead to political action: refusing to idolize Marshal Pétain "was often the

starting point for more significant and substantial resistance" and allowed people to shift from rejecting Vichy to taking a stance in the fight against the Nazis (p. 202).

Several essays prove that Vichy was a gray zone: in Sylvère Aït Amour's words, "things were not black and white; it was not all Resistance or all collaboration" (p. 84). No group of people can be put in a box: for instance, railway workers, usually considered a homogenous group, had divided opinions about Vichy's propaganda. Some approved Marshal Pétain's decision to seek an armistice, while others refused to accept the situation and participated in the Resistance.

When the Germans occupied France, they brought to France many colonial prisoners of war (meaning prisoners of war from the French territories outside of metropolitan France). If at the beginning, French citizens assisted them as an obligation towards Vichy's sanctioned aid, Sarah Frank shows that "the lines between colonized and colonizer became increasingly blurred" (p. 149) and French women, in particular, forged real connections with these prisoners. Emotions and recollections about life in Vichy are often gendered. This is evident, for instance, in the experience of the Wehrmacht brothels (Byron Schirbock's study), places of leisure and sociability between French prostitutes and the German military. Schirbock stresses that the experience was strikingly different for men and women, with the former developing "a rather positive memory of their wartime French lives," and the latter finding themselves and their bodies being transformed into "yet another French resource placed at the Germans' disposal" (p. 172). Women's diaries and personal recollections—such as those of Madeleine Blaess, analyzed by Wendy Michallat—also offer an in-detail depiction of what it meant to find yourself in the chaos of wartime France, fearing "starvation, bombing, illness and violence from both the Germans and from Resistance fighters" (p. 194).

Finally, cinema and documentary are good sources to study the ambiguity of propaganda. Steve Wharton shows how the Vichy regime took advantage of cinema to hide the difficulties of everyday life in France by “offering or inviting their alternative, regime-friendly, interpretations” (p. 223). David Lees concludes the book with an analysis of Vichy documentary film—in particular, Jean Masson’s *Nourrir la France* (1942)—where it is evident that Vichy propaganda went to great lengths to hide the wartime struggles, notably the food shortages.

This book provides a less-explored approach to Vichy France, history from below, and the history of emotions. It can be very helpful for students: it will expand their understanding of history and show them how to tackle different kinds of primary source material, including oral interviews and microhistorical case studies.

#### Notes

[1]. Irène Némirovsky, *Suite Française*, 1st North American ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 341.

[2]. Mark Mazower, “Foucault, Agamben: Theory and the Nazis,” *Boundary 2* 35, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 23-34; 23, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2007-024>.

[3]. See for example Henry Rousso, “Les Français sous Vichy,” in *Le régime de Vichy*, 2nd ed., “Que sais-je ?” (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 105-17, <https://www.cairn.info/le-regime-de-vichy--9782130592488-p-105.htm>: “La nature et l’action du régime ne peuvent se dissocier de l’impact de celui-ci sur la société française et des relations qu’il entretient avec les Français.”

[4]. Benedetta Carnaghi, Vincent Houle, and Guillaume Pollack, “Frontières. Circulations, vie quotidienne, illégalités. Introduction,” *Les Cahiers Sirice* 22, no. 1 (2019): 5-14, <https://doi.org/10.3917/lcsi.022.0005>.

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