

Women and the Second World War in France 1939-1948: Choices and Constraints

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Hanna Diamond's study of women in occupied France and the period immediately following the Liberation represents a considerable achievement and an invaluable contribution to scholarship on how French women responded to the hardships, upheavals and conflicts of wartime occupation. Using oral testimony from regional studies of Toulouse, Brittany and Paris, this study combines a focus on the voices, experiences and interpretations of French women who lived through this time with analysis of detailed archival material and the work of contemporary historians. Such a wealth of source materials results in a rich weave of narratives and perspectives which complements the complex and sometimes contradictory picture Diamond paints of French women and the range of 'choices and constraints' shaping their wartime lives

Women and the Second World War in France 1939-1948 is structured in two parts effectively mirroring Diamond's concern to assess how and if wartime experiences changed French women's post-war lives. The first part of the study focuses on the period 1939-1944 and looks at women's everyday lives from the perspective of their financial resources and paid employment and the daily struggle for physical survival; how women negotiated the difficulties of obtaining food, clothing and heating. This part ends with discussion of 'collaborations' and 'resistances' and reviews questions of choice and motivation in a whole spectrum of activities which were often interpreted in black and white terms at the Liberation. The second part of the study deals with 1944-8 and discusses the effects of the Occupation on French women's socio-economic, personal and professional lives in the immediate post-war period. The purges of the Liberation are re-read in a gender-specific manner, the consequences of perceived wartime choices, whilst everyday life and paid employment are investigated in order to understand the extent to which gender roles were altered by wartime experiences. The study ends with the debates which surrounded French women gaining the vote in 1944 and the impact of their entry into mainstream political culture at the end of the 1940s.

Diamond's empirically based account of French women's wartime lives provides an important addition to a growing number of books on the subjects of women, gender and the history of occupied France. Her approach is that of a historian of women, sympathetic to the lived experiences of her interviewees and grounded in a reappraisal of some traditional categories of analysis, such as resistance and collaboration, in the light of women's position in French wartime society. The innovation of her work comes from both the ways she challenges accepted interpretations of women's lives in occupied and immediate post-war France and from her construction of French women as subjects rather than objects of analysis.

Firstly, Diamond emphasises how historians of women and gender relations need to rethink their

interpretation of 1944-5 as a watershed in French women's lives and to ask the question to what extent was the Liberation a 'liberation' for women individually and collectively. Did it constitute a rupture in French women's lives? Were French women emancipated in personal as well as political terms? Did they experience the Liberation as a moment of release, the starting point for new lives, new expectations and hopes? Diamond's answer to many of these questions is a qualified 'no'. Her study works to advance the view that, although during the Occupation French women were to undergo great changes in their lives, this did not mean that the political, social and economic landscape of immediate post-war France was receptive to such a seismic shift in gender relations. This is not to say that French women were to return to pre-war roles as if little had happened. Diamond's study traces, for example, the ways in which the wives of prisoners of war were one grouping of women who were to experience massive upheavals in their lives. With the absence of a loved one, often the head of the household and decision-maker upon whom many traditional families had relied, such women had to develop new strategies for survival. The experience of occupation, the need to develop self reliance, resilience and a growing self-confidence in the face of severe obstacles, were to lead a considerable number to reject their pre-war pattern of existence on the return of their husbands. The evidence of the large increase in divorce rates in the immediate post-war period, although certainly not conclusive proof, supports Diamond's assessment of a shift in personal, if not more widely political, perceptions of women as shaping their own destinies.

Diamond's study also challenges some of the more commonly held views of the Liberation and its aftermath was a period when women in paid work were forced back into the home. Diamond points out that for some women this was precisely what they expected and desired. For others, they had gained access to jobs, training and educational opportunities which they wished to pursue further. Whilst it seems fair to assert that in a number of sectors, such as the textile industry, women were laid off to free up jobs for the returning men, in other sectors of the economy this was not the case. Diamond underlines the importance of regional variations and the individual situation of the women themselves in the complex picture of work and gender in the late 1940s. Married with children or single and childless, working class or bourgeois, in urban or rural settings. French women at the Liberation did not necessarily experience a mass return to the home hearth signifying withdrawal from one key sector of public life.

Secondly, Diamond argues persuasively for an understanding of women's participation and contribution to forms of resistance and collaboration as a series of 'graduations' more influenced by their day to day lives and experiences than by consciously political responses to national and international events. It is in her chapters on 'Collaborations' and 'Women and the Purges' that she provides some insightful analysis of the phenomenon of French women and collaboration. In times past, this has often been reduced to voyeuristic fascination with the *femmes tondues*; those women accused of sexual collaboration with the Germans and who had their heads shaved at the Liberation. Her perceptive interpretation of collaboration as a cluster of activities which were variously interpreted at the Liberation as anti-patriotic and anti-national opens up whole new avenues of investigation.

For Diamond, it is a case of reviewing the choices and motivations of individual women, some of whom took steps towards more openly collaborationist actions in the forlorn hope that this would curry favour with the Vichy regime and improve their situations. One such case is the wife of one prisoner of war who offered to take in a wounded German soldier and treat him as one of her own if Pétain would only send her husband back too. Diamond also investigates areas of wartime experience that have been little studied to date, such as the motivations and reported experiences of those French women who went to Germany to work, attracted by the promises of high wages and proximity to interned loved ones. These activities were rarely understood by the women concerned to equate with outright collaboration although a number were to discover to their peril that local neighbours and Resistance activists were to see their actions in a different light at the Liberation. For those women who took a more 'active' role in collaboration, Diamond provides a gendered re-reading of their actions, such as denunciation by letter to the French and German authorities and membership of collaborationist groupings. In an ironic twist, it would seem that, as with women and the Resistance, family networks, friendships and affiliations were the main catalyst for membership of a whole range pro-collaboration associations and groups. Diamond's work in French archives lends weight to her findings as

women on trial at the Liberation and after cited such connections as the justification for their actions. Indeed, these archives are an invaluable source for attempting to understand why some French women made such a choice in their lives. Very little of what Diamond unearths point to rabid ideological adhesion to the goals of the National Revolution or even informed political choice but rather, as with Berthe A., a university researcher, collaboration out of a sense of expediency in difficult times.

Inevitably, this study turns to the issue of *femmes tondues* but it is to Diamond's credit that this is presented as a multi-dimensional phenomenon which has its roots in cultural practises and attitudes at a time of national crisis centuries old and not limited to France alone. Her analysis is predicated on the explicit sexualization of a number of French women's wartime lives and a pervasive perception of women who broke social taboos as somehow prostituting themselves to the foreign invader. She links this, convincingly in my view, to a sense that French women needed to be put back in the roles and identities which many French men believed they had transgressed in wartime. Women were victims of a gender-specific punishment which had less to do with their conscious political choices and more to do with male fears and anxieties over disturbed gender roles after five years of national defeat and shame.

Diamond's analysis of the *femmes tondues* illustrates well the third aspect of her study which makes it such an admirable piece of work. Diamond works throughout the study to reject homogenising attitudes towards women in occupied France. Her study consistently rejects blanket statements over how French 'women' were and enacts a balanced and judicious interpretation of the variety of factors which influenced individual and collective behaviour and attitudes. Particularly impressive is her use of oral testimonies, collected mainly from Toulouse and the Finistère. Diamond herself points to the lack of Jewish or immigrant voices in her sample and it is undoubtedly true that her study would have benefited from such voices. They would inevitably have added another interpretative layer to her analysis as everyday lives were coloured by fear of persecution and anti-Semitic legislation made ordinary activities for others, such as queuing for food, an even greater ordeal for such women. That said, the women interviewed are treated with respect and seen to offer important evidence of local and regional activities and attitudes. They provide the texture of Diamond's history, the lived experience without which the story of women in occupied France could not be told. In this way, Diamond's study could be compared to Margaret Collins Weitz's *Sisters in the Resistance: How French women Sought to Free France* (New York, 1995), an account of French women's resistance actions and roles based on extensive oral testimonies. Yet, more so than Weitz, Diamond is aware of the difficulties inherent in soliciting and interpreting oral testimony, produced many years after events. Such women's stories are treated as one amongst many elements in the analysis and Diamond encourages readers to 'accept or reject the evidence as they would that of any other historical source' (p.14). On the one hand, Diamond rightly validates these women as important subjects of history but on the other she is fully conscious of the process of interpretation which structures her own narrative and those of the actors themselves as historical witnesses.

In terms of theoretical models, Diamond's account is conceived and written from the viewpoint of French women's responses to wider political forces and not from the viewpoint of the (male) administrators and legislators of the time. As a women's history of wartime lives and experiences, it explores women's public and private coping strategies and is less concerned with deconstructing the category of the feminine or discussing the specific ways in which women and gender became an important battle ground for the Resistance and the Vichy regime. For a detailed gender history of Vichy policy and propaganda towards women, Miranda Pollard's *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago, 1998) is an important contribution with a fascinating chapter on the abortion trials, a capital offence for Vichy and punishable by death. Yet, one of the challenges facing a largely archival study like Pollard's is how to present women as the subjects of history when their experiences are inevitably framed and constrained by the official discourse of the day. It is precisely such a receptiveness to women's voices in a social history 'from the bottom up' which makes Diamond's study such a stimulating read for lecturers and students alike.

Published in the Longman's series 'Women and Men in History', Diamond's study can be read as both an overview of French women's wartime experiences and as proposing new interpretations of how occupation and liberation affected French women's post-war lives and identities. Each chapter sets out clearly the areas to be addressed ends with a review of the key points made. Meticulous and well balanced, Diamond's study

is full of insightful analysis, synthesising existing critical material and offering original interpretations which give food for thought.

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