

France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944

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Reviewer: Robert Gildea

Julian Jackson's monumental history of Vichy is a powerful contribution to the historiography. No one knows more about this subject than he: every book, article, memoir and dissertation on it seems to have been located, analysed and woven into this account. Despite the thickness of the work it is also a pleasurable read: judicious, well crafted, always with an eye for the telling quotation or anecdote.

Jackson starts with a considerable run-up. A quarter of the book is devoted to the pre-history of Vichy: cultural anxieties after the nightmare of the Great War, the ongoing debate over reform of the Republic, the threat of class war and civil war in the 1930s, and the shadow of Germany that never seemed to lift. The Daladier government of 1938-40 is reinvestigated, highlighting a number of repressive policies that prefigured those of Vichy. Yet Jackson reminds us sharply of the power of contingency, that nothing was inevitable about Vichy. Without the defeat of 1940 it would simply not have happened.

When Vichy does make its appearance we are told that there was little black and white about it. What intrigues Jackson is its ambiguities, its complexities, its contradictions. It was a regime that believed in national renewal, and as such attracted people from all political persuasions who had faith in its possibilities. Many who later joined the resistance were long seduced by its message: these included Emmanuel Mounier and Hubert Beuve-Méry, later founder of *Le Monde*, both of whom helped to run the Vichy leadership school at Uriage in the Alps. It is instructive, says Jackson, that Charles Péguy, republican and socialist, Catholic and patriot, was claimed as an inspiration both by Vichy and the Resistance. At the level of *mystique* if not of *politique*, Vichy was a broad church.

Jackson also points out that choices were not easy under the German Occupation. The right and wrong that seemed so clear at the Liberation were by no means obvious at the time. When François Mauriac was consulted late in 1941 about the propriety of contributing to *La Nouvelle Revue Française* he said that he did not agree with the views of its fascist editor Drieu de la Rochelle, but observed 'Such is the position of France today that no one has the right to cast a stone at anybody' (p. 275). I have found a similar comment from Michel Debré, *commissaire de la République* in the Angers region, who asked a meeting in Cholet protesting at the acquittal of an alleged collaborator early in 1945, 'Who, in this room, has done nothing worthy of blame from the patriotic point of view since 1939?'

Of course this period is impossible to approach Vichy with a blind faith that the truth will out. Views have been bent and distorted both by collective memory and by historical controversy. Since Henry Rousso published his *Vichy Syndrome* in 1991 historians have had to pick their way gingerly between the battle-lines of rival camps. Jackson does this with his usual good judgement, framing the book with the debates of historians at the beginning and the construction of collective memories at the end. His conclusion, wisely if tentatively, is that 'the French past must be faced in all its contradictions and complexity' (p. 632).

Notwithstanding this magnificent achievement, attention should be drawn to one or two shortcomings in this work. First, despite the insistence on complexity, Jackson is reasonably happy with the conventional categories of resistance and collaboration. Jean Moulin, prefect of the Eure-et-Loir in 1940, before he became de Gaulle's man uniting the resistance movements in occupied France, is introduced as 'Jean Moulin: collaborator'. A little later Jackson concedes that the function of French officials was to serve as mediators between the German authorities and the French people, protecting French sovereignty and French resources as far as possible. This suggests that someone like Moulin cannot be seen as either collaborator or resister and that the old categories may be in want of revision. Likewise Jackson describes drinking with Germans in posh Paris night clubs as collaborationism, 'transgressing traditional moral codes' (p. 190). Elsewhere however he suggests that there were no clear rules of conduct under the Occupation, that how French should relate to Germans was governed by codes that were constructed, fluid and negotiable. At one point, after dealing with the case of Frédéric Joliot conducting experiments in Paris with the approval of the Germans, he asks whether 'it might be more useful to jettison these categories of resistance and collaboration for all but the small activist minorities' (p. 242). In the end, however, he decides to hold on to the concept of collaboration as far too useful, wrestling only with problems of definition.

Second, the story Jackson tells is very 'top down', political, diplomatic and intellectual. Public opinion is introduced by way of discussions relating to the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, cited above. By 1942, we learn, the people had largely parted company with the regime, but 'the people' is treated very much as a single entity. The exception to this is the chapter on the Liberation, where we are treated to 'micro-histories' which unfolded very differently from place to place, according to local conditions, the balance of resistance forces, the proximity of the Germans or Allies, and so on. It is a pity that this kind of micro-history is not used more readily for the Vichy period.

The final question is this: what is there left to say about Vichy and the Occupation? In a sense it is all in this book, which will become the standard manual for students and teachers alike. And yet there are other angles and approaches which may yield different results.

The picture of the Occupation painted here is very much that of German exploitation and French collaboration. The Germans, we are told, 'embarked on a systematic milking of the French economy' (p. 186). And yet German contracts for ships, planes, locomotives, electrical goods, leather goods and textiles ended the unemployment that had bedevilled France after the defeat and stimulated a boom in the French economy. The importance of French manufacture and manpower for the German war machine inclined the Germans to take account of French opinion. When a communist squad shot the Feldkommandant of Nantes in October 1941 Hitler demanded the execution of a hundred French hostages, but Otto von Stülpnagel, the military commander in France, denounced 'Polish methods' and managed to limit the figure to 48. He is

quoted by Jackson as saying 'If one wants the cow to give milk, it must be fed' (p. 171). Maybe the German Occupation needs to be seen less as merely exploitation and repression, at least in the early years, and more as a system of negotiation between authorities, reaching compromise where appropriate. After all, the Germans did need the French to remain on side for both economic and strategic reasons.

The role of French authorities and French notables must also be looked at carefully. Jackson suggests that officials acted as mediators between the German authorities and the French people, but also speaks of 'the destruction of local democracy' (p. 266). Local democracy was in fact far from being destroyed under Vichy: municipalities were combed to check mayors and councillors for loyalty, but radical and even socialist municipalities stayed on if they were deemed to have 'rallied'. *Conseils généraux* which were abolished in 1940 but were brought back by Laval as appointed *conseils départementaux* in 1942 in order to rebuild bridges to the political class. Local notables had a great knack of survival, so long as they trimmed to the regime in power, because no regime - whether Third Republic, Vichy or Fourth Republic - could do without their influence in the localities. This was one of the major factors limiting the extent of purges at the Liberation. Local government, however unexciting it may seem, in fact holds the key to much of how Vichy operated, and just how powerful or weak a regime it was.

Lastly, Jackson observes that 'the more is known about the social history of totalitarian societies, the more it is clear how unsuccessful they were in transforming civil society, even when people did not resist in any organized or political way' (p. 244). In fact he says very little about civil society. Other research shows how rich associative life was, even under the Occupation, from local fundraising projects to send food-parcels to POWs and networks of relations between town and country folk to improve food supply, to clandestine dancing (despite the ban on dancing imposed by Vichy, not the Germans) and a revival of pilgrimages and saint-worship, which many saw as a surer path to deliverance than armed resistance or waiting for an Allied landing that was very slow to come. Jackson has given us 'the social history of the Resistance' (p. 20), but the social history of the Occupation has yet to be written.

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