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**Denis Peschanski**, *La France des camps: l'internement 1938-1946*. Paris: Gallimard, 2002. 456 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, sources, and index. 26.50 € (pb). ISBN 2-07-073138-3.

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*La France des camps* is the published version of the *thèse de doctorat d'État* of Denis Peschanski, director of research for the *Centre d'histoire sociale du XXe siècle*. As such it is a work of great scope and copious documentation, for the author has undertaken new archival research and reinterpreted many standard studies. Peschanski continues the task of demonstrating continuities and ruptures in history by placing the French internment camps within a larger frame. Beginning in 1938, before the war broke out or the Vichy government took power, and continuing through the liberation, the study expands the enquiry beyond the role internment played in the Holocaust in France. Xenophobia, fear of the radical left, and the treatment of outcasts return to center stage in Peschanski's dramatic depiction of the politics and personnel that ran the camps. The author expands the enquiry to include disparate groups who populated the camps--refugees from the Spanish Civil War, Jews from Central Europe, communists, Gypsies, and finally, *miliciens* and *les tondues*, women whose heads were shaved as a mark of shame for their alleged collaboration with the Germans. With support from outside organizations, and through acts of resistance inside the barracks, inmates acted as agents on their own behalf, and not as the victims depicted in popular imagery.

The study is divided into eight sections and twenty-one chapters. Peschanski generally employs a chronological approach, in keeping with his desire to explore the continuities and ruptures among the Third Republic, Vichy, and liberated France during the first days of the post-war purge. He sets the French camps into a larger context by characterizing the twentieth century as the century of camps worldwide. He also provides a longer time frame for this phenomenon in France by carrying his investigation back as early as World War I and forward as late as the Algerian War.

In the section called "Une politique d'exception", Peschanski demonstrates how xenophobic feelings gained widespread currency by the late 1930s. Alien workers flooded France to fill the labor shortages that followed World War I. At the onset of the depression a series of complex and sometimes contradictory laws was designed to staunch the threat of an invasion of foreign workers. The declining influence of the political left after the fall of the Popular Front, and the refugee crisis of the Spanish Civil War, determined who would be the outcasts from French society and political life. Completing the image sketched by Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus<sup>[1]</sup> as they searched to explain internment and the quota laws of Vichy, Peschanski posits that xenophobia, antisemitism, pacifism, and communism had been woven into a fabric in French public opinion whose strands became nearly inseparable (p. 34). It is small wonder that 350,000 of the 465,000 Spanish who crossed the Pyrenees would be among the first subjected to mass incarceration in French internment camps.

Nearly all historians of the Holocaust in France mention that many internment camps had been built during World War I, or had been concentration centers for Spanish Civil War refugees. But Peschanski is the first to examine how much this phase of camp history indicates continuity between the policies of the Third Republic and Vichy.<sup>[2]</sup> For both governments, Spanish members of the International Brigades were doubly stigmatized as foreigners and as leftists. Peschanski points out, however, that members of the brigades expressed remarkable solidarity in the camps with unified celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the French Revolution. He also documents extensive aid that inmates received from outside political organizations.

The most familiar period of camp history begins with the “phony war.” Paranoia led to the law of 18 November 1939 which permitted prefects to intern anyone—foreign or French—“suspected” of carrying out an attack on national defense. Predictably, refugees from Central Europe, notably Jews, ranked high on the list of suspects.<sup>[3]</sup> During the war about 100,000 Jews passed through the camps and three-fourths of them perished in the Final Solution. But that story, told by many others, is not the focus of Peschanski’s study, which synthesizes and reinterprets earlier scholarship.

Instead, borrowing from methods employed by historians who have studied the death camps of Eastern Europe, Peschanski examines the architecture and etiology of the camps themselves. He finds that most camps were hastily constructed in response to a crisis. Indeed, in camps like Argelès-sur-Mer and Saint-Cyprien, inmates devoted most of their labor to the maintenance of inadequate barracks. Les Milles, outside Marseille, was a run-down brick factory, barely suitable for habitation. Drancy, in the industrial outskirts of Paris, had begun as a low cost housing project. Local populations and politicians complained about the impact of such hastily devised installations on the environment and the infrastructure. None of the French camps had been built with the care employed in German camps designed specifically for concentration, labor, and extermination. While poor conditions and overcrowding in the camps prior to the deportations of summer 1942 would lead to horrific conditions, epidemics, and some deaths, the French were not engaged in a policy of extermination.

Peschanski examines the politics of the 1940-42 period and finds Vichy committed to an active program of exclusion and of creating scapegoats. If defeat could not be the fault of a poorly prepared and directed army, it had to be the fault of the “other”—Jews, communists, foreigners, and freemasons (p. 165). For the Nazis, camps in the Occupied Zone remained marginal until the implementation of the Final Solution, except as a depot for communist and Jewish hostages to be executed in retaliation for attacks on Germans. Ironically, Peschanski finds that French public opinion turned against the existence of the camps following the hostage executions, as the camps came to be seen as Nazi gallows (p. 192).

One of the book’s major themes is the diversity of the camp population, including common law offenders and black marketeers. Peschanski gives more attention to political prisoners, mainly communists, and Romani (Gypsy) inmates of the camps than other historians have, no doubt a reflection of his earlier work.<sup>[4]</sup> He estimates about 15,000 political prisoners in the camps in the Vichy era, many of whom were well organized, disciplined, and able to present their concerns to camp directors (p. 434). Under threat of deportation to Germany or Algeria, or of selection as hostages, political prisoners frequently escaped the camps. Perhaps the cell organization of the communist party and long experience with clandestine activity account for their activism.

When Peschanski addresses the issue of the fate of the Roma in France under Vichy he reiterates his 1994 contention that documentary evidence shows that only 3,000 of the perhaps 40,000 nomads in France were ever in French camps, including Montreuil-Bellay (Maine et Loire) and Saliers in the Camargue, a traditional Romani gathering place.<sup>[5]</sup> While there was avid dislike of the Roma, and lively images of the “Gypsy spy” and the “Gypsy thief,” Peschanski simply does not find evidence that an anti-Roma program was part of the Vichy agenda. While there were discriminatory measures aimed at Roma, they were generally at the behest of German authorities. This stands in stark contrast to Vichy

efforts to preempt the Germans with the anti-Jewish Alibert Laws of 1940. Roma were deported from France as early as December 1941. Roma were also likely to be difficult to control in the camps, because internment and a sedentary life style were so antithetical to their traditional way of life (pp. 434-35). Peschanski finds that resistance and insubordination were under-reported in camp documents (p. 426).

He also spotlights the administration and personnel of the camps. In most cases, police were absent from all but the handful of camps designated as penal institutions. Local prefects were the key players in running local camps, although occasionally a police intendant would take an active role in camp administration, as in the case of Rodellec du Porzic, the Marseille police intendant who actually made individual decisions about whom to deport from Les Milles in 1942 (pp. 275-76). There was limited incentive to become a camp guard. The salary was so low that only single men would accept the pay and solitary conditions, although some may have been lured by the prospect of gaining experience that could provide entry to the regular police force or an opportunity to profit from the black and grey markets.

In another important departure from previous interpretations, Peschanski gives greater emphasis to the role played by Vichy police chief René Bousquet in the Final Solution. While others have focused on the attitudes and actions of Pierre Laval in 1942, Peschanski places responsibility for smooth roundups and deportations at the feet of Bousquet, who entered into an accord with the German Oberg willingly and actively. Bousquet considered French police cooperation to be the hallmark of French autonomy and of a new era of Franco-German cooperation. By 1942, such coordination effectively meant a concerted effort to eliminate the Jews. For Peschanski, the wrenching images of the 1942 deportations and the German seizure of the southern zone combined to demoralize the French, who he argues were not indifferent to the fate of the Jews, but rendered psychologically helpless in the face of total occupation of their country. As the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* forced more and more French people to work in Germany, the term deportation did not seem to refer to a distinctly Jewish experience.

Once the Germans occupied the entire country, the internment camps became less important, except as temporary holding tanks. The author estimates that by May 1944 only about 8,800 people inhabited the camps (p. 440). But by the end of 1944 the camps were in widespread use again, this time for displaced persons (foreigners who were not in compliance with immigration laws, but who could not return home), those who were a threat to national defense or public safety, and those who had interned others for political or racial reasons (p. 447). In the chaos and civil war of the liberation, administrative internment became an important tool of control, just as it had been in the first half of 1940. So hostile was the environment in the early months of the liberation that some of the women accused of collaboration with the enemy, tattooed and shorn in shame, returned to the camps to escape homes and villages where their safety was threatened. Camp conditions were deplorable and treatment of prisoners often violent. There are many reports of *maquisards* torturing *miliciens* (pp. 456-57).

The inmates of the camps during the liberation and the purge were as diverse a group as those who preceded them. But in the postwar era there was also a gender dimension to internment. The number of female prisoners fluctuated between 26 per cent and 36 per cent of the camp population (p. 461). Their numbers were clearly disproportionate to their actual political power under Vichy, suggesting that women were punished excessively in retribution for their transgressions.[6] In liberation France, some 800-900 Roma were kept incarcerated. Symbolically, the last internee to be freed in May 1946 was Romani. During the liberation perhaps 100,000 internees passed through the camps, many for black market activities. In total, between February 1939 and May 1946 Peschanski counts a grand total of 600,000 camp internees.

The sheer diversity of inmates over the seven years Peschanski examines means there were highly divergent experiences in the camps. There is a qualitative difference in the state of mind of a Jew knowing deportation would follow in a few days, even if his fate was not yet clear, and of a black marketeer sentenced to a punishment of perhaps a few months. For Roma, a nearly universally despised

people in Europe, forced settlement at a time of deportation, whether for labor or racial motives, had to be a very frightening event. Still, to properly evaluate this phenomenon, we must remember that these were internment and concentration camps, not reeducation camps, nor gulags, nor death camps.

The theme of ruptures and continuities is highlighted in the conclusion. The author considers Vichy's autonomous use of the camps between 1940 and 1942 to single out foreigners and communists to be a policy of exclusion that marked a clear rupture with the Third Republic. He reminds us that despite the crises created by the war, there was nothing inevitable about the camps. The French government made the decision to incarcerate deliberately. Indeed, French, not German, authorities created camps in the Occupied Zone for communists. Later, in the summer of 1942, there was a shift to a German policy of deportation, which Bousquet and Laval supported in order to maintain French sovereignty in the New Europe.

But Peschanski also cautions that there are numerous continuities. The personnel required to carry out these internments were numerous and often served the civil service across political regimes from 1939 to 1946.[7] More importantly, internment camps operated in France as early as World War I and reappeared at the time of the Algerian war, a story just coming to light.[8] Finally, these camps may not have seemed so aberrant in an era when Great Britain, Canada, and the United States also employed camps to control "enemy" aliens.

For Peschanski, the central event that influenced French contemporary public opinion, as well as historiography of the camps, was the Final Solution. At first, public opinion about the camps, as demonstrated by Pierre Laborie[9] was local and ambivalent, determined by the impact the camp had on the locale. With the deportations, French public opinion split, remaining mixed about the camps, which were French, and nearly universally condemning of the deportations, which were perceived as entirely German (p. 487). The fate of the Jews has also separated the camps from the larger context of the twentieth century so that this story has generally been told from a single perspective. Peschanski offers a complex palliative to this syndrome. He also highlights the diversity of the camp population and points out where inmates were agents rather than victims, both areas worthy of further investigation.

*La France des camps* is a major reinterpretation of this period. It is sometimes tough to read, mostly because of the painful subject matter. Once in a while because Peschanski's desire to drive home points seems repetitive. But that is a minor criticism of a well-documented, highly interpretive study, which will be the definitive work for a long time.

## NOTES

[1] The juncture of xenophobia and antisemitism was first examined in Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) and elaborated in Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[2] The definitive history of the Spanish Civil War refugees in France has not appeared in French or English, although some Spanish writers have looked at this question.

[3] For more on the confluence of antisemitism, xenophobia, fear of the left, and pacifism in French policy toward refugee Jews, see Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

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[4] Peschanski, "Discours communiste et Grand Tournant. Le vocabulaire de l'Humanité 1934-1936," doctoral dissertation, University of Paris, 1981. He is also the author of *Les Tsiganes en France 1939-1946* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1994).

[5] Peschanski, *Les Tsiganes*.

[6] For more on this question, see Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*, trans. John Flower (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002).

[7] Michael R. Marrus, "Les juristes de Vichy dans l'engrenage de la destruction," in Dominique Gros et al., *Le Droit antisémite de Vichy*, no spécial de la revue *Le Genre humain*, mai 1996: 50.

[8] Sylvie Thénault, *Une drôle de justice: les magistrates dans la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001).

[9] Pierre Laborie, *L'Opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

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