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Simon Kitson, *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis 1940-1942: Complexité de la politique de collaboration.* Paris: Éditions Autrement – collection Mémoires, 2005. Notes, bibliography, and index. France: €132 (pb); Abroad €161 (pb). ISBN 2-7467-0588-5. ISSN 1157-4488.

Review by Perry Biddiscombe, University of Victoria.

The most famous cultural depiction of early Vichy police officialdom is Claude Rains' character "Captain Louis Renault," who plays a central role in *Casablanca.* Rains' characterization is often cited as the most interesting element in the film, which is owed not only to Rains' ability as an actor, but to the fact that "Captain Renault" is in an intrinsically complex position. He is under Nazi influence, but not subject to direct control; he is corrupt, he abuses prisoners in his custody, he extorts favors, and yet he secretly despises the Germans and he eventually comes to thwart their purposes. The ambivalence represented by this kind of situation has recently been broached by Simon Kitson, an historian of the French police. Kitson's fascinating new book, *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis 1940-1942*, is the first detailed assessment of a surprising phenomenon that has long been known by historians, but is only now coming to receive the attention it deserves.[1] The security services in the early Vichy period, it seems, arrested 2000 German spies, some of whom were held in detention until the summer of 1944. Of these 2000, some were tortured and forty were executed. Although such counter-espionage functions were increasingly discouraged by various forms of German intervention, they continued until November 1942, when the Germans occupied southern France and dissolved Vichy's Armistice Army, including its security services. After that watershed, the desire to operate against the Germans meant joining the Gaullist or Giraudist resistance as the only option.

At first blush, the idea of writing a book about such an obvious point of tension between Vichy and France's German overlords might seem at attempt to revive the infamous "shield theory," in which early postwar historians attempted to argue that the Vichy regime was a reasonable effort to deflect German rapaciousness and prevent the harm that might have been caused by the imposition of a Nazi civil regime working solely for German interests. Indeed, even Kitson admits that his book's title is provocative. A careful reading of *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis*, however, soon dispels this notion. Kitson rightly claims that he is writing in the vein of the now-dominant school of thought that sees Vichy rooted in a specifically French tradition of counter-revolutionary activism and emphasizes the regime's initiation of collaboration with the Germans. Historians argue this was intended to win France pride of place in the New Order and also reflected a certain community of interests with the occupier, especially regarding the supposedly inimical nature of Jews, Communists, and Freemasons. Kitson contends, however, that within the general trend toward collaboration there were numerous contradictions and paradoxes, and he continually asserts that Vichy was sometimes resolute in protecting its interests, sometimes hesitant and meek. His main argument is that he is following the lead of scholars such as Robert Paxton, who have emphasized a Vichy regime trying to maintain its sovereignty, carrying out collaboration as a conscious policy choice and developing its National Revolution as a right-wing, yet autonomous, project. Vichy was subordinated to Germany in many ways, but pursuit of German spies was one way in which the regime could legally assert its autonomy (although the Germans argued that any anti-German activity by French military services was a breach of Clause Ten of the Rethondes Armistice). Kitson is insistent in contending that Vichyite counter-espionage activity should not be considered resistance, despite the fact that many French officers involved in such operations later tried, for the sake of their reputations, to qualify it as such.

In *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis*, Kitson sets himself three specific objectives: first, to discern who ordered the pursuit of German spies (particularly whether the responsible elements were renegade security officers or members of the senior echelon in the Vichy government); second, to investigate how counter-espionage was carried out in a state dominated by the same country that was the object of investigation; and third, to explore the nature of the process from both the French and the German sides of the fence. With regard to the first issue, Kitson argues that the impetus for crackdowns on German spies came from the very top of the administrative structure. He claims that many senior Vichy leaders sympathized with Action Française, which had always posited Germany as the main enemy, and he points out that a similar antipathy toward Germany had been strongly entrenched within the French military since 1870. Even despite Vichy's expressions of support for collaboration, these tendencies did not disappear overnight. Thus, senior officials such as Charles Huntziger (the Secretary of State for War), Maxim Weygand (the head of the administration in French North Africa), and Henri Rollin (the director of police and counter-espionage services) were all profoundly anti-German. It was these senior officials who sanctioned the interdiction of German agents. On occasion, even more pro-German leaders, such as Pierre Laval and François Darlan, shared such concerns, although a number of German spies were released from detention after Laval's return to the premiership in April 1942. All Vichy leaders were partisans of the National Revolution and some hated Britain, but the "instinctive" anti-Germans especially imagined their country as a sovereign authoritarian state, similar to Franco's Spain or Salazar's Portugal. Thus, actions against German agents operating on Vichy soil were hardly the sole work of low-level officers in the security services (although these operatives usually shared the anti-German inclinations of their superiors).

According to Kitson, there were three ways in which the Vichy leadership attempted to protect the state's sovereignty: first, collaboration meant cooperation with Germany by the French state, *not* by individuals. The Vichyite security services resented private individuals who entered into direct contact with agencies of the occupying power, particularly informers who gave up their countrymen to the Germans. Second, the Vichyite apparatus claimed an administrative monopoly in the fight against the Resistance and the Free French, at least in the unoccupied zone, and it tried to prevent German infiltration of the structures engaged in this battle. Vichyite officials were not above arresting and executing German agents who were illegally sent into the unoccupied zone in order to infiltrate the Resistance. Third, Vichyite officials, particularly army officers, felt strongly about the territorial sovereignty of southern France and French North Africa. They were willing to negotiate away some of this sovereignty in search of concessions, but they certainly did not want these prerogatives grabbed by the Germans or sacrificed for the sake of German agents illegally operating on French soil. Kitson argues that the capture of German agents actually facilitated collaboration, at least indirectly, because the Vichyites gained bargaining chips they could use in dealings with the Germans. Indeed, Red Cross visits to detainees, notification of arrests and limited prisoner exchanges were all eventually negotiated.

In addressing his second area of focus--the complications of counter-espionage in a country dominated by its main adversary--Kitson admits that it was difficult for the Vichyite security services to operate against the Germans. Since the openly declared policy of the French State was one of collaboration, the public could not be alerted to the threat posed by German spies. Indeed, some Frenchmen believed that it was permissible to keep the Germans informed about events in a country officially pursuing a course of pro-German neutrality, and informers within the government were legion. In addition, the various French counter-intelligence services were both split by rivalries and short of resources. Indeed, they had to devote attention to the Allies as well as the Germans, although Kitson points out that they were relatively indifferent toward Gaullist or British espionage, as long as it was directed against Germany rather than Vichy, and that the Americans were actually well-regarded. One wonders if the Italian, Hungarian, Romanian and Finnish security agencies faced the same kinds of challenges as their Vichyite counterparts, or if the intelligence services of the later Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe found themselves is a similar bind vis-a-vis their Soviet masters?

As for topic number three--the motivations, techniques, and consequences of German espionage in Vichy France--Kitson provides some interesting details. The Germans launched such operations because they knew from their own post-World War One machinations about the myriad ways in which a defeated power could sabotage an armistice agreement. Naturally, they wanted their own sources of information on the resistance movement, public opinion and the order of battle in the Armistice Army, and they also used agents in order to make purchases on the black market, thus maximizing their access to French resources. Like their French counterparts, however, the German intelligence services were riven by bureaucratic rivalries, in this case between the Abwehr and the SS-Sicherheitsdienst. Although the Germans deployed their own nationals in France, eighty percent of their agents were French men and women. The reasons for this were myriad. Many were spying for money. There was high unemployment in France after the demobilization of the army, and even after some of the unemployed were absorbed by the economy, there was a problem with inflation. Another class of recruits was inspired by ideological sympathy, particularly members of the *Parti populaire française*, Breton separatists, and Arab nationalists in North Africa. A few of these "sincere traitors," after their capture, gave the Nazi salute and cried "*Heil* Hitler"! Others were lured by the romantic image of espionage developed in interwar books and films. Still others were psychologically unstable or they were antisocial criminals. Girlfriends of German troops also participated. The first head shavings of female collaborators were actually performed by Vichyite special services operating in North Africa during the autumn of 1941. Many spies were journalists or commercial travelers; a few were disguised as refugees or escaped prisoners-of-war.

Kitson also discusses the treatment of agents after capture, a matter that he rightly notes has not received attention in most studies of counter-intelligence, but seems especially topical in the age of Abu Ghraib. Whatever their feelings about the Nazis, Vichy intelligence agents apparently admired some of their methods for extracting information, although it has to be admitted that the police and special services of the Third Republic had also taken liberties in this regard, as would those of the Fourth Republic. Matters of context aside, however, it is still unsettling to read about prisoners being threatened with deportation to Britain, shocked with electric current or beaten and kicked. At a special villa between Marseilles and Toulon, where the *Travaux ruraux* set up facilities for *interrogatoires poussés*, prisoners entering the building were exposed to the sight of strategically-located torture implements and blood stains, and the site was surrounded with rotting meat, meant to suggest the smell of decomposing bodies. Interrogators believed that such things set the proper tone for forthcoming rounds of questioning. After interrogation, captured German spies often experienced inhumane conditions of confinement, usually in military prisons, where they were deprived of adequate food, isolated from human contact and maligned by their jailers. Such treatment, in a few cases, resulted in the suicide of detainees. Furthermore, despite the full occupation of France in November 1942, cases of German-inspired espionage were still proceeding through the French courts until the end of 1943 and some prisoners were held until the eve of the country's liberation, although the Germans then rushed to release them so that they could be redeployed against the Allies as a fifth column. As one can imagine, the Germans made a much greater effort to have their own nationals released; it was mainly French men and women who were left rotting in Vichy's jails.

Kitson is able to tell this intriguing story because of the recent release of 1400 cartons of French secret service archives that were seized by the Germans in 1943 and then captured by the Russians in 1945. The Russians returned these *fonds de Moscou* only in the late 1990s, whence they were stored at the S*ervice historique de l'armée de terre* in Vincennes. These documents provide the bulk of the research base for *Vichy et la chasse aux espions nazis*. Kitson has a justifiable suspicion of memoirs or oral testimony provided by French secret service officers who were active during the "black years" because he regards these sources as self-serving. He also suspects that archival holdings in French hands were probably culled by these same men and that this was done for similarly self-interested reasons. The *fonds de Moscou*, however, escaped this sifting process and Kitson believes that they comprise a relatively

uncontaminated and objective record of events. My only observation on this score--in fact, my only criticism of the book--is that Kitson should perhaps have consulted the German archives, which share some of the characteristics of the *fonds de Moscou*. Indeed, since Kitson is obviously interested in the German half of the story, this approach would seem a necessity, although to give the author his due, he observes that even the holdings now available in France are vast and that the integration of such large volumes of material is difficult.

In general, Kitson displays an admirable sensitivity in exploring the tension between Vichyite collaboration and the exercise of autonomy, thus demonstrating the limits of each of these trends. In so doing, he not only tells us an unknown story, but develops a theme that cuts across the grain of the current historiography, in the process enriching it. Given on-going interest in Vichy, there certainly must a readership for such a volume in the English-speaking world, so one hopes to see a forthcoming translation.

NOTES

[1] Robert Paxton, *Vichy France* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001), pp. xix-xx.

Perry Biddiscombe
University of Victoria
perrybid@uvic.ca

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