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Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life Under the Occupation*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006. 496 pp. Notes, index. \$35.00 U.S. ISBN 978-0-300-12132-2.

Review by Robert Zaretsky, University of Houston.

There is something of Georges Seurat's "Un Dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte" to Richard Vinen's important and disturbing book. Seurat's painting portrays the mingling of different social classes in an everyday setting, yet there is little movement. It is essentially a monumental still life whose human subjects seem coherent when seen from a distance yet dissolve into countless points of light when approached. There is no narrative arc; instead, the painting seems to deny any attempt at presenting a story.

So, too, with Vinen's portrait of the "unfree" French. Like Seurat, Vinen is interested in the ways that Frenchmen and women from different walks of life mingled, yet remained distinct in Vichy France. Like Seurat, Vinen reveals how individuals and categories, seemingly so solid and recognizable, melt away upon closer inspection. And like Seurat, Vinen does not tell a single story, but instead shows the difficulties in any attempt to do so.

In his introduction, Vinen announces that he wishes to "understand this period in terms of individual lives and in terms of the constraints and problems that faced particular individuals [.]" (p. 2). With disarming candor, he states that he has "little new to say about Vichy itself," much less a new interpretation to propose. Instead, he offers a social history that focuses on those men and women who have been largely marginalized or overlooked. These individuals fill the ranks of the "unfree French"--Vinen's powerful, perhaps deliberately awkward inversion of the Free French under de Gaulle in London. They include, of course, those who, either as POWs or victims of the STO, were forced to live in Germany. But the "unfree" French also embrace the millions of refugees swept up in the exodus of 1940, as well as those individuals whose difficult pre-war social condition placed them in even more desperate straits during the occupation.

Opening with the exodus--the term given by the French to the flight southward of nearly eight million civilians and soldiers during the summer of 1940 in advance of the German invasion--Vinen introduces the reader to an approach that refuses broad strokes or generalizations. Vinen underscores the event's chaotic, kaleidoscopic nature. It is, tragically, easier to assert what was missing during those terrifying weeks than what was present. Not only was there an absence of knowledge about unfolding events, but there was also the sudden disappearance of the nation's political, social and military institutions. The collapse of communication between the government--itself in flight from Paris and uncertain about events at the front--and local authorities was complete.

In this vacuum, civilians were as vulnerable to rumor and anxiety as their ancestors had been during, say, the Great Fear of 1789. (For those of us who lived through the experiences of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, we now have an inkling of what it means to be subject to the impotence of civil authorities, the wildfire of rumors, the separation of families, the mad scramble for security, the uncertainty over one's destination and the dull, constant throb of fear. Interestingly, the Third Republic's inability to manage this crisis in 1940 sealed its fate in the same way as did the Bush Administration's feckless response to Katrina mark its own political decline.) In the end, there were as many experiences of the exodus as there were those who were swept up in it. For example, Vinen observes that the experience was

frequently liberating, especially for young, single men. We hear less about single women, but it appears they had fewer reasons to celebrate the anarchy. As Vinen notes with typical acuity, the presence of French soldiers side by side with women in the retreating columns must have had a powerful impact on the psyches of both sexes.

Once the tidal wave of refugees ebbed, it left behind a reality resistant to generalizations. Take the Vichy regime. In a series of lectures about occupied areas of France during WWI and WWII, Richard Cobb dissected with great insight and irreverence the “dotty” nature of the government that settled in the spa town of Vichy, staffed by men of every ideological hue, at the center of which stood the upright figure of its octogenarian leader, Philippe Pétain.[1] Vinen is equally merciless in his examination of the contradictory, often incoherent aims of the motley collection of individuals at Vichy, all of whom were drawn by the “huge job market” created by the political purges in the summer of 1940 (p. 59). Here, as Vinen shifts from social history to biography, we find that some French were less “unfree” than others. His dual portraits of Maxime Weygand and Pierre Laval are brief and brilliant, emphasizing the common concerns held by these two radically dissimilar men. At the end of the comparison, Vinen notes with lapidary, devastating effect a final and common trait held by these men: neither “had much sense of the novelty of Nazism[.]” (p. 66).

Ultimately, all power in Vichy radiated from the figure of Pétain. Vinen adds little that is new to the literature on Pétain and Pétainism. (Along with Robert Paxton’s path-breaking book and Marc Ferro’s standard biography, there is also the brilliant dissection of Pétain’s language by Gérard Miller. In fact, academic work at times seems to be more little more than a series of footnotes to Jean Dutourd’s surreal depiction in his novel *Au bon beurre* of an audience held by Pétain.[2]) Vinen echoes the finding of many local studies: first, that public opinion made a clear distinction between Pétain and the policies of his subordinates; and second, by the end of 1941, Vichy had lost its battle for the hearts and minds of the French. Vinen’s discussion of Pétain doesn’t seem to dovetail with his commitment to social history, yet he does provide a clear and pungent portrayal of the character of the man and the regime he led. There is, moreover, an alarming relevance to his damning discussion of Pétain’s growing detachment from reality, the “absurdity” of his image and self-image, and the ways in which his entourage constructed an alternate reality, choreographing his official visits and writing the radio addresses he made from his carefully guarded hotel.

Of course, the Vichy regime was itself increasingly “unfree” due to growing German demands for financial, material and human resources. When it came to securing the release of the nearly two million POWs, redressing the deepening food and energy shortages, or protecting the population from the occupying Germans, Pétain and his government were at best impotent, at worst criminally collaborationist. Vinen devotes a chapter to the “Jewish question,” arguing that simple dichotomies like “survivor” and “victim” do violence to the messy reality. He notes that social and cultural differences that played so large a role in the fates of other Frenchmen also had an impact on French Jews. Moreover, he rightly claims that although Vichy promulgated, quite on its own volition, anti-Semitic laws that helped the Nazis to pursue the Final Solution in France, anti-Semitism “was not a defining feature” of the regime (p. 136). On the other hand, in this effort to undermine received wisdom, he exaggerates with the claim that “many people who supported the Resistance were anti-Semitic.” Five out of thirty-five Resistance organizations which, in a 1942 poll, referred to a “Jewish problem,” is not “many” and offers a narrow foundation for such a blanket claim.

As Vinen knows, it is difficult to know the thoughts or feelings of the poor and marginalized since they rarely wrote to others or to themselves in journals. At times, this leads him to look for the proverbial lost keys under the lamppost since that is the only lighted place. In a laudable effort to portray the motivations and perspectives of those French women who volunteered to work in Germany and numbered perhaps 80,000, Vinen falls back on an autobiography written by Odette Chambroux long after the war. As Vinen acknowledges, Chambroux sets herself apart from her peers by the mere fact

that she actually wrote her own account (p. 165). Her story is fascinating, but may well be of limited application to others.

Nevertheless, Vinen employs great ingenuity, energy and empathy in resurrecting these obscure lives. When it comes to the rural and urban poor, women who were either single or married to POWs, POWS themselves and *déportés*—a term first used, not for rounded-up Jews, but instead for those packed off to Germany under the auspices of the forced labor draft (*service du travail obligatoire*, or STO)—historians (like myself) have tended to see them as objects of Vichy propaganda or policies, or have reified them as “public opinion,” rather than study them as subjects worthy of sustained attention. Among the notable exceptions to this tendency are the works of Sarah Fishman, Dominique Veillon, H.R. Kedward and Robert Gildea.[3] In his painstaking combing of archival material, memoirs and secondary sources, Vinen creates a revealing portrayal of life in the camps, factories, and farms of Germany. He reminds us that, contrary to the posters and slogans of Vichy, the POWs most often were not “suffering martyrs” penned behind barbed wire, but instead were well-fed men who frequently lived outside camps as part of work Kommandos. In fact, Vinen makes the provocative observation that “a prisoner of war was less vulnerable to arbitrary violence by the Germans than a civilian in France itself” (p. 307). In his recreation of the rhythms of life in the Stalags, we now understand better why Louis Althusser cultivated his appreciation of Proust, Sartre reflected on the notion of death in Rilke and Heidegger, and Fernand Braudel wrote his revolutionary thesis *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*. [4]

As for the home front, while material life was not as desperate as it was in Poland or even Holland, it was nevertheless grim. Food scarcity became a national preoccupation; much like Edmond de Goncourt during the Siege of Paris, even the banker Charles Rist returned to the subject obsessively in his diary. The same animals once again became staples of diet: in 1941, the prefect of Paris warned against the health dangers of stewed cat. (Vinen does not say if Parisians had their eyes on the denizens of the zoo at the Jardin des Plantes.) And, just as in Paris under the Prussian siege, the one subject in German-occupied Paris that eclipsed food in importance was fuel. The cinema houses owed their popularity not just to the figurative heat generated by the Gabins and Arlettys, but the physical heat provided by fellow filmgoers.

When not dealing with the constant, dull pain of hunger or cold, young Frenchmen worried about the STO, introduced in early 1943. Here as elsewhere, Vinen adds essential points to a picture grown dull by broad strokes. For example, he reminds the reader that many “volunteers” under the *Relève*—the earlier, Faustian scheme cobbled together by Laval in 1942, in which Germany agreed to release one POW for every three workers—were, in fact, forced to volunteer. Vinen neglects to mention one critical element to the *Relève*, namely, that the French workers had to be skilled. It was a demand that not only was concealed from the French population, but also helped empty the country of critical workers while obtaining the release, for the most part, of peasants or unskilled workers. He traces how one’s social or economic standing determined one’s vulnerability—paradoxically, poor peasants and miners could better avoid the draft than many from the bourgeoisie—and points out that it wasn’t until the Resistance fully established itself in 1944 that young Frenchmen had a viable alternative to the STO. At the same time, Vinen’s discussion reveals in stunning detail how the initial success of the STO was due not just to the machinery of the French State, but the complicity of local institutions like the Church, notables, and even families.

In his final chapter on the Liberation, Vinen returns to the narrative mode that he used in the opening chapter on the exodus. While the account returns to military and diplomatic matters, reintroducing the usual suspects like de Gaulle, Darlan and Giraud, it tells the story with dispatch and insight. Even here, Vinen disconcerts. For example, he remarks on the unsurprising, yet easily forgotten ways in which gender and racial biases played out in the wake of liberation. Notoriously, French women accused of sleeping with Germans had their heads shaved in public ceremonies, but French POWs or STO draftees, once back in France, were not judged, much less shamed for sleeping with German women

while still on the far side of the Rhine. Black Americans serving in the armed forces often met less racism in France than in the US, yet ironically they furnished the great majority of those convicted and punished by American military courts for rape. It is not a coincidence that the greatest number of victims in the wave of purges that followed France's liberation came from the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Finally, with one last nod, whether or not intentional, to our current predicament in Iraq, surveys of public opinion in the weeks after D-Day revealed that Americans, unlike the British, were more often resented than embraced by the French, and that they often worsened a difficult situation by their "confused and tactless" behavior (p. 331).

For most French people during the war, life was, if not Hobbesian, nevertheless "miserable" (p. 367). Vinen's conclusion is not as bland or unexceptionable as it may appear. First, as Vinen points out, the raft of studies on the appalling lot of Jews, Gypsies, and Resistance fighters tends to deflect attention from the quotidian misery experienced even by those more fortunate. Vinen's effort to redress this imbalance is essential. Second, his account challenges the conclusions of some monographs, like Gildea's brilliant study of Chinon, which suggest that life during the "black years" was not, perhaps, all that black.

The disparity may be due to the different emphases between a local study and work of synthesis, or between the relatively privileged residents of Chinon and the often underprivileged classes studied by Vinen. Or it may be due to the ultimately elusive nature of the past. While I am not usually prone to epistemological despair over my profession, I was unsettled a few times by Vinen's language. At various times he refers to the "futility" of trying to put oneself in the situation of the French during the war, of the "inscrutable" nature of what people said or did under Vichy, of the dubiety of any generalization about the French during the summer of 1940 and of the questionable veracity of the memoirs. At the same time, he brilliantly blurs conventional categories like resistance, collaboration, denunciation and the black market. Like the figures in Seurat's painting, Vinen's "unfree French" are rendered with precision, yet nearly unknowable.

The fog we associate with war, Vinen reminds us, also spills into peace—or, at least, as in the case of Vichy France, a state of non-war. Yet, at the same time, his impressive book reminds us that we nevertheless must do our best to find our bearings with the landmarks and tools at hand. Appropriately, Vinen's concluding chapter begins with a passage from Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," in which Vladimir and Estragon exchange conflicting memories about the Vaucluse or, as Gogo insists, "la Merdecluse." Vinen might have quoted the exchange that immediately follows when Vladimir sighs to his mate, "You're hard to live with, Gogo." When Estragon replies that it might be better if they went separate ways, Vladimir answers: "You always say that. But you come back every time." So, too, Vinen suggests, for historians: we can't go on, but we do go on.

NOTES

[1] Richard Cobb, *French and Germans, Germans and French: A Personal Interpretation of France under Two Occupations: 1914-1918/1940-1945* (Watertown, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 1981)

[2] Robert Paxton, *Vichy France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Gérard Miller, *Les poussa-au-jour du marechal Pétain* (Paris: Livre du Poche, 1997); and Marc Ferro, *Pétain* (Paris: Fayard 1987).

[3] Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale

University Press, 1991) and *The Battle for Children: World War II, Youth Crime and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth-century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard 2002); Dominique Veillon, *Vivre et survivre en France, 1940-1944* (Paris: Histoire Payot, 2003); H.R. Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France* (Oxford 1978) and *In Search of the Maquis* (Oxford 1995); and Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation of France, 1940-1945* (New York: Macmillan 2002).

[4] In his speculations on how the suspension of normal life in the Stalag may have affected Braudel's conception of la longue durée, Vinen might have referred the reader to J. H. Hexter's brilliant essay, "Fernand Braudel and the *Monde Braudelien*," in the *Journal of Modern History*, 44/4 (1972): 480-539.

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