

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 110

Denis Varaschin, ed., *Les entreprises du secteur de l'énergie sous l'Occupation*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2006. Pp. 447. 30€. ISBN 284832-0451.

Review by Kathryn E. Amdur, Emory University.

The fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II launched a flotilla of “memory” works on the war’s impact and, for France, on the legacy of the German Occupation, including reappraisals of themes of collaboration and resistance.[1] The fiftieth anniversary of the birth of L’Electricité de France (EDF) also inspired a set of essays on the technical and political bases for the decision to nationalize that industry in 1946.[2] Yet in archival terms, the present decade may prove even more fruitful, as the sixty-year restrictions on archival access begin to expire. Denis Varaschin, professor of history at the Université d’Artois (Arras) and author of his own doctoral thesis on an electrical equipment firm in Lyon, presents here a book of essays on the energy sector during the war that dig further into the EDF’s own archives plus those of the German war command in Paris. The work also extends a long tradition of economic and business history in France, led by scholars such as François Caron, president of EDF’s historical committee and director, with Maurice Lévy-Leboyer, of several of the theses now underway or recently completed by the contributors to this volume.[3] The text is also part of the larger agenda of a research team on the business history of the Vichy era, chaired by Hervé Joly, at France’s Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).[4]

This volume is drawn from a conference held in 2004 in Arras (Pas-de-Calais), a region known for its coal, gas, and electricity production and for its wartime history as part of France’s “forbidden zone” (*Zone Interdite*) attached to the German military regime in Brussels. The book’s twenty-three essays mainly target individual firms in diverse regions of France, to highlight their varied economic, social, and political experiences during and after the war. The firms’ own records, such as general assembly reports and financial accounts now held in the EDF archives, provide timely evidence instead of the hindsight or half-truths more common in memoirs or trial testimony after the fact, especially for firms accused of economic collaboration or illicit profits.[5] The longitudinal view also sets wartime behavior in the context of pre- and postwar trends, from the origins of rationalization and concentration of industry to the consequences of nationalization and new forms of labor relations (the postwar *comités d’entreprise*). Indeed, the goal is to restore contingency to (“*défataliser*”) these outcomes, as editor Varaschin notes in a thoughtful introduction (p. 34). Even so, the content remains at times only partly digested, although rich in detail.

The book’s micro-level approach is somewhat balanced by a few entries with a broader institutional or societal focus. Heidrun Homburg discusses the role of the German war command in Paris (the *Militärbefehlshaber* or MBF), although she targets the conflicts between the Nazi Party and the German army more than their impact in France. Alain Beltran, author of several works on the energy industries, focuses here on French state agencies such as the Ministry of Industry’s coal and oil division, the *Direction des Carburants* or DICA.[6] Christophe Bouneau and Bernhard Stier look ahead to the postwar European electricity grid, born of Nazi plans not just to import power to Germany but to coordinate energy supplies across occupied Europe. Bouneau further cites the social effects of wartime energy scarcity in France, from limiting the use of household appliances such as the radio (a key source of news) to altering work hours and setting clocks on German time, two hours ahead. A trio of essays by Martin Chick, Dirk Luyten, and Serge Paquier look in turn at the energy sectors in wartime Britain, Belgium,

and Switzerland. Gil Montant uses “panel data” to analyze economic performance and profitability in the coal mines; but all other works here are narrative, not econometric, in format. As case studies, the essays complement while not resembling in scope the macro-histories by Michel Margairaz and Henry Rouso, from the same CNRS research team, or the broad cultural approach in Beltran’s earlier study (with Patrice Carré) of the “marvels” of electricity that “revolutionized the planet” and “gave birth to the modern world.”[7]

In economic terms, the energy sector was above all the supplier of fuel for wartime and postwar industry. Key themes of this book include the production, distribution, and consumption of energy and the means by which the companies and the French state adapted to scarce resources and manpower and to heavy demand from the Germans. France had been the world’s leading importer of coal in the 1930s, as well as dependent on imported oil, and its electricity and water power remained insufficient to fill the energy gap, especially during the drought years of 1941-1943. Electricity, at least, escaped the brunt of Nazi plundering because it could not be stockpiled or easily transported out of France, given the dearth of high-tension power lines (Christophe Bouneau, p. 124). Yet it indirectly privileged Germans’ interests by fueling war production for their military needs.

Except for such direct consequences of wartime, the economic transformations noted here were mostly longer term, continuing the course of concentration and rationalization of industry that began much earlier. By 1938, a 3-billion franc program of expansion was launched for the electrical industry. The long time-lag for building its heavy equipment limited the possible impact of any brief period, even during war (Anne Dalmaso). The industry’s costly technology also required huge infusions of capital, for which the state became the only plausible source after 1945 (André Straus). Also, beginning before the war, there were ententes and technical exchanges with Germany or even America, including licensing agreements and partial mergers, a precursor to postwar “multinational” firms (Pierre Lanthier; Benoît Noël and Jacques Wolff; and Jean-Pierre Williot).

The theme of continuity also shapes the discussion of employers’ social policies, such as those linked to Vichy’s paternalist “Labor Charter,” although these are rarely the focus of a given essay. Rang-Ri Park-Barjot and Marie Lotodé survey one electrical firm’s social programs, but mainly in terms of their costs and their effects on wartime profits, “illicit” or otherwise. Djouhra Kemache concludes that another firm’s social action brought a “dialogue” that “durably altered” labor-management relations—although with little evidence for the claim among her essay’s varied economic themes.[8] Marie-France Conus and Jean-Louis Escudier more pointedly target the strikes that challenged new work rules and piece-rate pay schemes in the coal mines, a locus of conflict especially since the 1930s. Yet here again, interesting claims remain unsupported: that new apprenticeship programs were meant to train a new cohort of workers less hostile to modern methods, and that postwar nationalization eased conflicts by funding still newer technologies, in place of the speed-ups and other managerial tactics (“rationalization without mechanization”) that had aimed to raise productivity on the cheap, through workers’ efforts alone.

Other social issues, transcending the workplace, made the war seem more a parenthesis than a stage in the firms’ longer history. One hydroelectric dam, later dubbed “the French Niagara,” is linked here to Vichy’s ideological “return to the soil” because of the plan to use river water to irrigate new farmlands (Alexandre Giandou). The Nazi presence further took its toll, even though fewer workers in the energy sector faced compulsory labor in Germany, given their irreplaceable skills at home, and many firms that filled German contracts were “protected” by accords with Nazi armaments minister Albert Speer. Indeed, Nathalie Piquet’s essay on forced labor points to the use of Soviet and Ukrainian workers in the northern French coal mines, under conditions like those in Germany’s own mines in the Ruhr. In the French mines, German engineers and foremen supervised both French and foreign workers, although French foremen could be just as harsh, or so the post-Liberation purges would argue. But again, instead of purge trial reports, the firms’ own records are the main source of evidence here on company behavior,

including on questions of economic collaboration or illicit profits during the war.

And on these questions, the book's evidence and argument remain rather spotty. One hydraulic equipment maker, writes Anne Dalmasso, survived and prospered while avoiding "the most shocking compromises" of collaboration—"as far as we can know" (p. 93). Other firms boasted of acts of resistance by staff or directors, such as aiding Jews or requisitioned workers. In one dramatic case, Pierre Angot of the Régie Autonome des Pétroles (RAP) died in captivity in Germany, where he had been deported for "camouflaging" fuel, machinery, and manpower to prevent their seizure by the Nazis (Christophe Briand). Another employer, Aimé Lepercq of the Compagnie Générale d'Electricité (CGE), was head of his sector's *comité d'organisation* (a Vichy regulatory board), but he took part in the armed resistance and survived German arrest to serve as finance minister in Charles DeGaulle's first provisional government (Yves Bouvier).[9] In fact, Bouvier concludes, "like the majority of French firms," CGE "collaborated" with both Vichy and the Nazis, in the sense of seeking German contracts. Yet far from "enrich[ing] itself" by such acts, the firm showed "a slow erosion of profits" (though no major financial losses), according to its wartime balance sheets. Thus, political intent is reduced to simple numbers on the bottom line.

Indeed, acts of resistance or collaboration are hard to define when the goal remained making a profit. As Catherine Vuillermot states in her look at a consortium of hydroelectric producers, "whatever the situation, business is business" (p. 148). The wartime environment became nearly irrelevant for a group whose general assembly reports rarely noted the political context and never used the word "Occupation" until 1946 (p. 162). In another firm (CGE, in Yves Bouvier's account), wartime contracts were meant not just for profits but for "technical normalization" of relations with Germany, an extension of prewar ententes and licensing agreements. Other such deals brought postwar sanctions, with one firm sequestered and another's assets confiscated (Jean-Pierre Williot; Benoît Noël and Jacques Wolff). But both firms' directors had more overt political ties. One helped to fund collaborationist movements, and the other's son fought for Germany on the Russian front. Despite financial penalties, the latter director escaped conviction for collaboration after the war.

Beyond collaboration, the economic realm also dominates the book's international dimension. The case of Switzerland, a neutral country that sold electricity to Germany much as it proffered its banking and railroad transit services, appears here not as an object of blame but as an instance of exports that balanced the state's need for coal imports, thus serving national and private interests concurrently (Serge Paquier). For Britain, where coal was the primary fuel, oil was vital for naval use and helped secure the Allied victory. Yet the Suez crisis soon showed the vulnerability of the international oil supply while Europe's attention remained riveted on coal and steel, as seen in the first plans for a postwar economic community (Martin Chick). The case of wartime Belgium, an area under direct German rule, reveals fewer contrasts to Vichy than one might expect, while raising similar issues of compulsory labor, choice or constraint in contracts with Germany, and social relations in the workplace. The differences became more striking after the war, when Belgian firms' generosity on wages successfully warded off the nationalization of electricity, a Socialist demand based more on sharing high prewar profits than on blame for wartime treachery (Dirk Luyten). The case is portrayed here, indeed, as one more sign of successful business planning for the future, whichever side won the war.

For France, too, the nationalization of electricity appears here as mainly an economic event, with minimized political motives or social consequences. André Straus attributes the move to the industry's enormous capital needs and long-term debts, especially since the 1930s. Having previously studied the industry's financing in France since the turn of the century, Straus notes the Left's demands to nationalize the electrical "trust," allegedly dominated by "foreign capital," but he insists that foreign investment was rare (except in the Paris region) and that only the state could finally fill the gap. In their account of one firm's wartime performance, authors Park-Barjot and Lotodé find that nationalization ended but did not resolve the dispute over illicit profits, for which the firm had at first

been sequestered. In the coal industry (Conus and Escudier), nationalization may have helped win the short-term “battle for coal” by transforming labor relations and thus permitting technical advances and higher outputs. Yet in the longer term, the mines faced deindustrialization and high unemployment until their final shutdown in France in 2004.

In all, the goal of this volume may be summarized best by author Bernhard Stier: to revitalize the business history of the Occupation era by assessing, for individual firms, the balance between “autonomy” and “outside pressures” and between the costs and the benefits of integration into the Nazi war economy (p. 290). As editor Varaschin adds, the point is to distinguish the interests of single companies and those of the nation, while discerning the meanings of “collaboration” and “resistance” for each (p. 32). In a larger sense, quoting Paul Ricoeur, he then reasserts the goal of all contemporary history: to explain outcomes that might otherwise seem preordained by modernity.[10] As such this book is a useful example of the work of this CNRS research group and its affiliate for contemporary history, the Institut de l’Histoire du Temps Présent (IHTP).

LIST OF ESSAYS

Pierre Lanthier, “Vichy et l’Occupation dans le moyen terme: Investissements et structures organisationnelles des équipementiers électriques de 1930 à 1955”

Heidrun Homburg, “L’administration allemande des biens ennemis dans la France occupée 1940-1944: Synthèse et deux études de cas dans l’industrie électrotechnique”

Anne Delmasso, “Opportunités et contraintes de l’économie de guerre Neyret-Beylier Piccard-Pictet, 1935-1945”

Yves Bouvier, “Cohésion et stratégies d’un groupe industriel en période d’incertitude: La Compagnie générale d’électricité dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale”

Christophe Bouneau, “L’économie électrique sous l’Occupation: Des contraintes de la production aux enjeux de l’interconnexion”

André Straus, “Le financement des entreprises de production d’électricité pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale”

Catherine Vuillermot, “Le groupe Durand sous l’Occupation”

Rang-Ri Park-Barjot and Marie Lotodé, “Une société de production, transport et distribution de l’électricité sous l’Occupation: Loire et Centre (1940-1944)”

Alexandre Giandou, “Une société d’économie mixte sous l’Occupation”

Djoughra Kemache, “La centrale thermique de Saint-Denis, de l’Occupation à la Libération”

Benoît Noël and Jacques Wolff, “La consécration allemande d’une invention française: Le gazogène Imbert”

Serge Paquier, “Le cas d’un petit pays neutre: La Suisse”

Martin Chick, “Sécurité nationale, conflit et ravitaillement en carburant et en énergie électrique dans la Grande-Bretagne en guerre”

Dirk Luyten, "Le secteur de l'énergie en Belgique dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale: Un secteur 'privilégié'?"

Bernhard Stier, "Expansion, réforme de structure et interconnexion européenne: Développement et difficultés de l'électricité sous le nazisme, 1939-1945"

Alain Beltran, "De la difficulté d'être un secteur stratégique: Le rôle de la direction des carburants pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale"

Christophe Briand, "La Régie autonome des pétroles et la Société nationale des pétroles d'Aquitaine pendant l'Occupation: Rivalité et stratégie commune de deux sociétés pétrolières régionales"

Marie-France Conus and Jean-Louis Escudier, "L'évolution du rapport capital/travail dans l'industrie houillère, 1936-1946"

Gil Montant, "Analyse des performances des compagnies houillères du Nord--Pas-de-Calais en 1935-1945: Une étude sur données de panel"

Nathalie Piquet, "Emploi de main-d'oeuvre forcée dans les charbonnages du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais"

Jean-Pierre Williot, "Les entreprises gazières de la région parisienne sous l'Occupation: Contraintes apparentes et opportunités nouvelles"

Florence Mackowiak, "Les compagnies gazières du Nord de la France sous l'Occupation: La Société artésienne de force et lumière et son activité à Arras"

Sébastien Durand, "Le casse-tête énergétique des entreprises girondines sous l'Occupation: Prélèvements, pénuries et adaptations"

NOTES

[1] For example, Philippe Burrin's *La France à l'heure allemande, 1940-1944* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), reviewed for H-France by this author in July 1997.

[2] Association pour l'Histoire de l'Electricité en France, *La nationalisation de l'électricité en France: Nécessité technique ou logique politique?* Actes du 11e Colloque de l'AHEF, 3-5 avril 1996, réunis et édités par Laurence Badel, avec le concours de l'Electricité de France (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996). Some of the same authors contributed to both volumes.

[3] See also Maurice Lévy-Leboyer and Henri Morsel, eds., *Histoire générale de l'électricité en France, 1919-1946* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

[4] GDR (Groupe de Recherches) no. 2539, "Les entreprises françaises sous l'Occupation"; other founders of the group include Dominique Barjot, Patrick Fridenson, and Michel Margairaz. See also Hervé Joly, ed., *Faire l'histoire des entreprises sous l'Occupation: Les acteurs économiques et leurs archives* (Paris: CTHS, 2004) and *Les Comités d'Organisation et l'économie dirigée du Régime de Vichy* (Caen: Centre de Recherche d'Histoire Quantitative, 2004), both based on conferences organized by the same CNRS research group.

[5] Compare Jean-Claude Hazera and Renaud de Rochebrune, *Les patrons sous l'Occupation* (Paris:

Édition Odile Jacob, 1995), which relied especially on such retrospective data.

[6] For example, Beltran's essays in Olivier Dard et al., eds., *L'Occupation, l'Etat français et les entreprises* (Paris: ADHE, 2000); Beltran et al., eds., *La vie des entreprises sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Belin, 1994); and Beltran et al., *Histoire(s) de l'EDF* (Paris: Dunod, 1985).

[7] Michel Margairaz and Henry Rousso, "Vichy, la guerre et les entreprises," in Dominique Barjot and Henry Rousso, eds., special issue on "Stratégies industrielles sous l'Occupation," *Histoire, Economie et Société*, no. 3 (1992); Michel Margairaz, *L'Etat, les finances et l'économie: Histoire d'une conversion, 1932-1952*, 2 vols. (Paris: Comité pour l'Histoire Economique et Financière de France, 1991); Alain Beltran and Patrice A. Carré, *La fée et la servante: La société française face à l'électricité, XIXe-XXe siècle*, with preface by Alain Corbin (Paris: Belin, 1991).

[8] Compare Robert L. Frost, *Alternating Currents: Nationalized Power in France, 1946-1970* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), not cited in the book here under review.

[9] This firm is also analyzed by Hazera and Rochebrune in *Les patrons sous l'Occupation*, cited above.

[10] Paul Ricoeur, "Remarques d'un philosophe," in *Ecrire l'histoire du temps présent* (Paris: CNRS, 1993), p. 37.

Kathryn E. Amdur
Emory University
kamdur@emory.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172