

H-France Forum

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Christine Haynes, *Our Friends the Enemies: The Occupation of France after Napoleon*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. 404 pp. Notes and index. \$39.95, £31.95, €36.00 (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-97341-5.

Review essay by Alan Forrest, University of York

This book, incisively and elegantly written, treats an important subject that has, perhaps curiously, been passed over too lightly by most of the histories of the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic years, the Allied occupation that followed Napoleon's two abdications in 1814 and 1815. It was, she claims, an occupation like no other in Europe's past, an occupation designed not as an act of war but as a measure to help prepare France and the rest of the continent for a lasting period of peace, what she terms an "occupation of guarantee" until France had fulfilled the terms of the Vienna settlement and paid off the huge sums that were imposed as reparations for the damage inflicted by the Napoleonic Wars. The circumstances of the occupation, she believes, changed the mood among the occupied population, and made them more cooperative. People's expectations mellowed. As a police informant reported to the prefecture of the Dordogne, people may have shuddered at the peace treaty, "but everywhere confidence is expressed in a better future" (p. 43). Far from antagonizing local people, the experience of occupation may even have contributed to a mood of acceptance and brought greater understanding of those who had so recently been France's sworn enemies.

To achieve this was itself a tall order, as people's expectations of an occupying army were almost universally low. Occupation generally followed invasion of the territory by a hostile force, young men frustrated by the opposition they had encountered and often bent on revenge. Looting, theft, rape and abuse of local people were not occasional events that could be dismissed as ill-judged or unfortunate. They happened on all fronts, when soldiers without food and fodder for their horses found themselves in regions of plenty or in villages with grain and hay laid in for the winter. Recent experience in the Napoleonic Wars did little to inspire optimism, and the French themselves had made themselves feared and hated in many of the territories they overran. There were times – as in Spain or Russia when the French were on campaign – when theft and pillage were encouraged by officers. There were others, when a siege was successful and a town finally surrendered, when the troops would expect, in accordance with longstanding military tradition, to be given the freedom of the town (and its people) for 24 or 48 hours of self-enrichment and sexual libertinage. In such circumstances, civilians were there to be exploited, and there is no suggestion that such behavior was seen by the soldiers themselves as something of which they should be in any way ashamed. It was simply a part of wartime life, part of the experience of soldiering, and part of the recent experience of the men from the Allied armies who now occupied France. Invasion and occupation brought soldiers and civilians into an often unwelcome contact with people they neither knew nor understood, and they brought repeated allegations of abuse, violence, and petty crime of every kind. Occupying armies won few friends by taking hostages from the local community to ensure that their demands were met. But that does not mean that Napoleon had always sought to avoid threatening civilians, since that could

have its military uses, too. Invasion and occupation could be positive moral factors in forcing concessions from the other side. Or, as he wrote, “an intimidated enemy...makes all the sacrifices required of him... One always negotiates more advantageously...with a sovereign who has not left his capital and whom one is threatening, than with a sovereign who has been forced to leave it.” [1]

The auguries were not especially good. When the Allies first entered French territory in 1814, they were still at war, fighting Napoleon’s forces in the Campagne de France and encountering exactly the sort of civilian resistance that attracted anger from the troops and invited brutal reprisals. Across the east of France peasants responded to Napoleon’s call to arms by retrieving shotguns from their attics to defend their property and engaging in the sort of guerrilla tactics which regular soldiers hated so much. During the occupation that followed there were frequent complaints of abuses by the troops, most frequently from the same areas where partisans had mounted a resistance, with claims that property was damaged and vandalized, farmers insulted and abused, wives and daughters assaulted and raped, and civilians subjected to wanton attacks. Such accusations only increased after the Hundred Days, when troops who had believed the war to be over found themselves back in uniform as part of the occupying force. Many resented it, and showed that resentment through their mistreatment of the local population. In Paris their anger was often focused on the art treasures and monuments to Napoleonic victories which they found in the capital, including the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel and the art collections in the Louvre, many of which had been seized on Napoleon’s orders from the various states of German and Italian Europe and were now proudly displayed in what had only recently been the Musée Napoléon. Across the occupied zone there were continual provocations and acts of resistance as mayors and local people dragged their feet over billeting or requisitioning for the occupier. There were reports of attacks on soldiers, even of occasional murders, which were often covered up by villagers and consequently went unsolved, as Jacques Hantraye has demonstrated in the only other recent work on the occupation.[2] And for ordinary French men and women, the occupation promised to be harsh and unpleasant, or, as Haynes phrases it, “a time to endure” (p. 109).

Yet by the time the occupying forces left France—two years early, in 1817, once the reparations had been paid—relations between the occupier and the local population had improved significantly, to the point where regrets were expressed at their departure. This, Haynes suggests, rightly, was a major achievement, not just for the Allied commanders but also for a French civilian population who had soldiers billeted on them at a time of widespread economic hardship and on whose tolerance the maintenance of peace was dependent. It was a notably harmonious occupation, with violence and murder relatively rare occurrences. Some may question, however, whether the occupation went so far as to turn former “enemies” into “friends.” Memories of the first brutal encounters did not fade overnight, and though there are suggestive anecdotes here showing how individuals forged firm friendships and how chance sexual encounters turned into marriages and lifelong partnerships, such cases were probably rather exceptional. Few people really enjoy the experience of occupation and the exactions that go with it. In France there were higher taxes to pay and requisitions to collect. There was an element of humiliation, too, the constant reminder as they went about their daily lives that France had been defeated, and defeated so utterly that their adversaries had been able to impose regime change by restoring the Bourbons. There was also the discomfort of having enemy soldiers in their midst, policing their

communities, and often enjoying more generous rations than local civilians could themselves afford. This was especially true in the later period of the occupation, when France suffered a serious subsistence crisis and parts of the country were reduced to hunger and malnutrition. The sight of well-fed foreign troops in their midst inevitably produced feelings of resentment and jealousy.

The different occupying armies had different priorities, with the Austrians and Prussians most determined to exact restitution for past humiliations. Being occupied, especially in the zones that their troops controlled, was not fun; persuading them otherwise would take both discipline and perseverance. But that, according to this study, is what the occupying forces, under the overall leadership of the Duke of Wellington, set out to achieve, with, apparently, considerable success, forbidding the armies from stealing and foraging freely, insisting that all food and equipment must be paid for, and trying to treat the communities they occupied in a helpful and unthreatening way. The French authorities cooperated, too, working with the Allies to monitor relations between the soldiers and the civilian community. As a result, by mid-1816 much of the initial distrust had been dispelled. Allied troops were no longer left to police the community on their own, as French national guardsmen joined Allied soldiers in delivering policing and justice. From 1816, it was agreed that offenders, whether occupying soldiers or French civilians would be tried by officials of their own nation and punished under their own laws. Keeping the peace would be a collaborative effort. And where the military authorities cooperated, most notably in the British and Russian zones, relations would remain fairly harmonious.

The Russians, indeed, come out of this book particularly well, their commander-in-chief, Count Mikhail Vorontsov, imposing strict discipline on his men and showing particular sensitivity towards the local population. The Russians had arrived with a fearsome reputation due to French losses in the Moscow Campaign, with the Cossacks in particular conjuring up images of extreme violence and barbarism in French minds. Once in France, however, the Cossack soldiers drew large crowds with their displays of horsemanship, while their contacts with civilians were generally polite and correct; very soon, it would appear, the Russians came to be regarded by the French as the most considerate of the occupying nations, an army whom they could respect and admire. Their officers—many of whom were fluent in French—made a particularly good impression on their hosts, with whom they mingled at banquets and balls, in salons and masonic lodges. By the time they withdrew in the spring of 1819 following the peace conference at Aix-la-Chapelle, some Frenchmen allowed themselves to express regret. The occupiers had been good customers of their shops and stalls, of course, and they missed their trade. But they also admitted to missing the drama and excitement they had brought to their streets and squares. Over time they had merged into French life to become almost part of the landscape. And some had blended into their families, too, as husbands and boyfriends. Not all the occupied troops were present when their armies left for home.

Christine Haynes is careful to quote from French memoirs and French archives in support of her case, and she is right to do so. The occupying armies were only too keen to boast of their success in winning over local people, and their governments prone to hail this as a national achievement, playing down any difficulties that had arisen or any loss of discipline that might have antagonized the French. They saw this as cause for self-congratulation, a source of national pride. But it is surely significant that French sources also heaped praise on the occupier and

admitted to regret when the Allied forces finally withdrew. In the final analysis it is their view that justifies the central thesis of this book, the notion that within three years the occupation turned former foes into future allies. Familiarity with foreign troops and their conduct in peacetime encouraged a more outgoing attitude, a more cosmopolitan spirit which did much to dissipate longstanding prejudices. The two sides learned to cooperate and to help each other in moments of difficulty, so that traditional fears and animosities were overcome. Occupation, in other words, bred trust rather than hatred. It is a big claim, and one that might lead us to reconsider our traditional view of military occupation.

Perhaps, more accurately, it should lead us to analyze the nature of the occupation, the context in which mutual understanding could grow, and to see in what measure this was different from the occupations of the previous century. For this was not an occupation undertaken in anger, in the heat of war. Indeed, in their memoirs several Russian officers confessed that their years in occupied France were years when, released from the constant dangers of war, they could relax and enjoy one another's company without fear of attack from the communities they were policing. They were, they said, among the happiest years of their lives. For occupying their zone of northern France was not like war. It was essentially a peacetime operation, undertaken to ensure that France fulfilled the terms of the Vienna peace settlement, and it represented a return to a certain kind of reality. It did not threaten the civil population as wartime occupations invariably did. Indeed, despite its inherent political message and the economic costs it entailed for the occupied towns and villages, it could be understood as a key part of a healing process after a generation of conflict. Occupier and occupied could both appreciate that.

This leads Christine Haynes to her most significant verdict on the occupation, and one that will give food for thought to historians of wars both before and after 1815. As an "occupation of guarantee," it should not be compared to occupations in the heat of war, but rather to the peacekeeping missions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, occupations whose main purpose is to prevent rather than to engage in armed conflict. And this, she emphasizes, was something new in the diplomatic cauldron of the early nineteenth century, something that pointed to the future, to the use that we currently make of peacekeeping missions, akin to those of the United Nations. It is a bold claim and an interesting question, one that should engage historians of warfare both before and after the Napoleonic era.

NOTES

[1] Bruno Colson, *Napoleon on War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 124.

[2] Jacques Hantraye, *Les Cosaques aux Champs-Élysées: L'occupation de la France après la chute de Napoléon* (Paris: Belin, 2005).

Alan Forrest
University of York
alan.forrest@york.ac.uk

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