

Tzvetan Todorov. *A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944*. Translated by Mary Byrd Kelly, edited and annotated by Richard J. Golsan. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1996. Notes and bibliography. vii + 138 pp. \$19.95 US. ISBN 0-87451-747-8.

Review by Robert D. Zaretsky, Honors College, University of Houston, for H-France, July 1997.

Tzvetan Todorov first established his reputation in the late 1960s and 1970s as a semiotician and structuralist, introducing pivotal east European thinkers, most importantly Mikhail Bakhtin and the Russian Formalists, to the West. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Todorov began to diversify, edging toward historical texts and issues. *The Conquest of America*, a study of Western colonialism and the clash of cultures based upon an imaginative and lucid reading of sixteenth century works, was published in 1982. More recently, he coauthored *Au nom du peuple*, a collection of oral testimonies of life in the concentration camps of Communist Bulgaria (his native country). This work marks Todorov's transition from historian to historical actor of sorts, for not only does he salvage the memories of this horrific and obscure period, but also questions his own memories of his behavior and thoughts as the son of a privileged member of the regime. He writes that "I was an adult and did not seek to close my eyes to the world; yet, the fact is that horror and I lived side by side and I neither knew about it nor tried to combat it." As a result, the stories he records in *Au Nom du peuple* are personal: "I could never say that they do not concern me" (p. 12).

The story in *A French Tragedy: Scenes of Civil War, Summer 1944*, is no less personal. In part, this is because France has been Todorov's adopted country since the 1960s. More importantly, it is personal in that it raises the same moral issue that his childhood and early adulthood in Bulgaria raised: How are men and women to behave in evil times? The town of Saint-Amand (in the Cher), where the drama unfolds, no less than Sofia, "prompts an ethical debate," for the story "brings individuals to grips with one another and thus puts into play their personal responsibility" (p. xvii).

He arranges his material into three acts: Uprising, Negotiation, Punishment. Act 1 (the uprising) offers a short course on the history of the Resistance, in which Todorov attributes an influence and monolithic character to the PCF (Parti communiste français) that, as I will subsequently suggest, contradicts the historical consensus. Confusion, principle, and passion mostly account for the uprising, which occurs on 6 June 1944. Led by Daniel Blanchard, René Van Gaver, Hubert Lalonnier and Fernand Sochet, the *résistants* succeed--if only briefly--in gaining their goal, which is to liberate Saint-Amand in advance of the anticipated arrival of the Allies. They storm the town and besiege the headquarters of the *Milice* (the paramilitary organization of Vichy, which closely collaborated with the Gestapo). The latter soon surrender and are taken

prisoner. Among their number, however, is Simone Bout de l'An, the wife of the head of propaganda of the *Milice*. Upon learning the news in Vichy, Francis Bout de l'An immediately gathers a number of *miliciens*, wins German logistical support and heads toward Saint-Amand.

Todorov elegantly follows the snowballing of events: the short-lived celebration in "liberated" Saint-Amand, the mad rush of civilians to join the FFI (*Forces françaises de l'intérieur*), the drunken excesses, and the contradictory attitudes of the various resistance leaders. The festivities quickly give way to confusion and fear when a German reconnaissance plane flies over the town. The *résistants* quit town as quickly as they had arrived, leaving the civilian population to explain themselves to the arriving Germans and *miliciens*. Saint-Amand is rapidly retaken, and the *résistants* who remained behind are either captured or shot to death. Nearly two hundred hostages are rounded up, which Bout de l'An supplements with some sixty relatives and sympathizers of the *résistants*. Locking the tragic pieces into place, he then places Joseph Lecussan in effective control of the town and sub-prefecture. A violent anti-communist and anti-semitic, Lecussan was an associate of the infamous *milicien* Paul Touvier in Lyon and listed, among the several murders to his credit, that of Victor Basch, the elderly leader of the League of the Rights of Man.

In Act 2, Todorov introduces René Sadrin, the mayor of Saint-Amand and one of the heroes of the story (Sadrin wrote down his memories of the period, which Todorov published in the original French version alongside his own account, but these were unfortunately dropped from the English translation). A local winegrower, Sadrin joined neither the Resistance nor the collaborators; he belonged, Todorov would say, to the camp of humanity. Indifferent to ideology, Sadrin's actions were motivated solely by the desire to "relieve the pitiful sufferings" of his fellow men and women (p. 49). In the company of two other "just men", François Villatte and Bernard Delalande, Sadrin undertakes an epic quest to secure the release of the hostages taken by both sides. In a borrowed car fitted with billowing white sheets as flags of truce, the three men barrel across the back roads of the Creuse over the next few days, working against repeatedly postponed deadlines and the mutual suspicions, pride and hatred of the two camps. Through the intervention of Blanchard and Van Gaver (who miraculously re-enter the story at this point), Delalande and Villatte persuade "François", the leader of the local FFI, to exchange Simone and the other women captives against the hostages taken by the *Milice*. Both sides keep to their word, and the exchange takes place. Yet the fate of the *miliciens* held by the *Maquis* is still undecided, and before it can be broached, the Germans attack the resistance hideouts.

The third and final act is terrifying. Convinced that the captured *miliciens* risked the lives of his own men, one of the leaders, Georges Chaillaud, orders that they be executed. The order is carried out, and the thirteen men are hanged by men who have

known them since childhood. Lecussan, now installed in Saint-Amand as subprefect, learns about the executions and immediately contacts the Gestapo headquarters in nearby Bourges. The commander, Fritz Merdsche, agrees to help avenge the dead *miliciens*. Inevitably, the target of their reprisal is the local population of refugee Jews. Seventy men, women, and children are rounded up and sent to Bourges, where twenty-six of the men are eventually killed, pushed one by one into dry wells at Guerry. One prisoner, Charles Krameisen, manages to escape and recounts the story. A short time later, in response to the assassination by the resistance of the local leader of the *Milice*, eight of the women (and a lone Jewish man) are also plunged into a well.

Before discussing the Epilogue, I wish to raise certain points concerning the narrative. First, there is Todorov's claim that his story is unlike others, for instead of a "world of black and white [he] discovered a series of distinct situations, of particular acts, each of which called for its own separate evaluation" (p. xvii). Such a remark will mystify every historian of wartime (or peacetime) France (or any other country) who believes they have dealt with these same elements of "distinct situations" and "particular acts" in their own narratives. His exhortation that the historian of Vichy France go beyond the "hagiography and systematic denigration" (p. xvii) of this period seemingly ignores the impartial work done on Vichy over the last quarter century.

More importantly, there is the role attributed by Todorov to the PCF. What are we to make of his assertion that "the military leadership of the Resistance in May 1944 is in the hands of the Communists"? (p. 4). Such a statement tells us little, and is ripe for misinterpretation. Recent historians, from René Hostache to John Sweets, have shown that the structure of the Resistance, as well as relations between individual Communist members of the Resistance and the leadership of the PCF (not to mention Moscow), were extremely complex. Yes, the "'party of the executed' already enjoy[ed] an incontestable moral prestige" (p. 6). But, notwithstanding Todorov's implication, the Communists were not calling the shots in 1944. The editor Richard Golsan's reference to the Communists as a party which, after the war, "liked to call itself the 'Party of 75,000 Executed' in reference to the number of its members shot by the Germans during the Occupation" requires the emendation that this figure is more than twice the estimate of most historians (see the remarks of Jean-Pierre Rioux in *The Fourth Republic: 1944-1958*, p. 476, n. 33).

Todorov's focus on the Communists is intriguing. Is it possible that this history is more personal than one first may have thought, and that the ghosts of his Bulgarian past have slipped into the France of his historical imagination? Todorov does not, in fact, even require the Communist presence to justify and explain, according to his own subsequent analysis, the genesis of these events. As Todorov himself notes, the local resistance leaders did not follow the directives of the Communist-dominated

COMAC (*Commission d'action militaire*). Can one, he wonders, "really talk about 'orders' in this circumstance? The Resistance does not follow military discipline, far from it..." (p. 11). Instead, he argues that it was with "the best of intentions that the Resistance leaders make their decision on May 31; and that is why, instead of being wrong, the decision is tragic" (p. 12).

The element of the tragic points to Todorov's principal concern: morality, and not history per se. Interestingly, the goal of *Au nom du peuple* was "not to furnish factual information, but to provide the wherewithal to reflect upon the destiny of human beings caught in a totalitarian mechanism". With *A French Tragedy*, substitute "tragic" for "totalitarian" and the purpose is the same: to examine the moral actions of men and women caught in infernal circumstances. In the Epilogue, Todorov quickly reviews the fate of the various actors in the tragedy. It is a mix of unmerited obscurity for many of the heroes, unforgivable leniency for some of the villains, and unexceptionable continuity for the great majority of bystanders. He then turns to the story's "dramatic and ethical qualities". By the former, he means the fatal causality of events; how one ineluctably led to the next, culminating in the horror of the wells at Guerry. With the exception of the Jewish victims, the actors are fully responsible for their actions: "They act, make choices, enjoy their freedom, and exercise their will. It is therefore they who are subject to moral judgment" (p. 123).

Todorov insists on a fundamental moral equivalence between Bout de l'An and "François", the FFI leader of the Creuse. Though their principles are radically different, both men are blinded to the cost in human lives entailed by adherence to these principles. Both consider the enemy as unworthy of life; both are preoccupied by pride and principle. As a result, the life of an entire town hangs in the balance: Bout de l'An threatens it with destruction (an all too real menace, given the destruction of Oradour-sur-Glane a few days before) while "François", who can easily resolve the crisis by releasing Simone, is quite willing to see the threat carried out. And both men are equally astonished by the efforts of Sadrin and especially Delalande, who eventually assumes the leading role in the negotiations. Why, they both seem to wonder, is he so interested in the lives of these hostages? As "François" insistently asks Delalande, "Whose side are you on?"

This is a crucial point. Bout de l'An and "François" understand human motivations exclusively in terms of self-interest. They are blind to the motivation of those "individuals who put the dignity and lives of human beings... above the ideals that drive the maquis and the militia alike" (p. 72). Both men think first of their image, next of their ideals, and rarely if ever of the lives of others. As a result, though there is an "irreducible asymmetry" at the core of their respective ideologies, there is an unsettling parallel in their blind attachment to principle and indifference towards human life. As for Resistance leaders Blanchard and Van Gaver, they acted on behalf

of the honor and dignity of France. They died so that France would actively assist in its own liberation. As such, they "work[ed] for the public good" (p. 127). Yet, though Blanchard and Van Gaver's actions are praiseworthy and good, they cannot be judged exclusively in these terms. Recall that these men acted in the public sphere, and that the actions had public consequences. When this is the case, Todorov argues, the ethical principle that must be applied is the assurance "that the good that should ensue from this will be greater than the bad that could come from it" (p. 127).

In other words, we confront the distinction made by the German sociologist Max Weber between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. The former is the context of heroes; they act in the public sphere on behalf of ideals which may cost them their own lives, as well as the lives of others. The ethics of responsibility, on the other hand, spurs the actions of rescuers, not heroes. As Todorov notes in his book *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (1996), rescuers act on behalf of individuals, not abstractions. Their actions attend to the humanity of their fellow men and women. Into this category fall Delalande and Sadrin, the local bishop (who offered to replace the hostages with his own person) and the local peasant who took in the half-crazed escaped prisoner Krameisen. There is no call for violence or sacrifice, but a concern for the ordinary virtue of dignity and an "intimate awareness of the community of men" (p. 134). It is such a concern that prodded Delalande to win the release not only of the original hostages, but the Jewish hostages subsequently taken, as well as to testify on behalf of certain *miliciens* after the liberation.

Such acts rarely merit public commemoration. There is undoubtedly a monument to the martyrs of the resistance in Saint-Amand, but one wonders if Delalande is remembered. Todorov's sympathetic account partly repairs that omission. Yet, Delalande's relative isolation leaves Todorov little cause for optimism. Like the chorus at the end of a Greek tragedy, Todorov has assumed a difficult task: to find meaning in a story rent by evil. His account, impartial and impassioned, is admirable in its analytic strength and incisiveness. We should welcome the voice of a thinker who, though not an historian, examines important ethical issues still treated gingerly by some professional historians and 'speaks what he feels' with great lucidity and force.

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*A comment by Richard Golsan:*

While Robert Zaretsky does an admirable job of summarizing Todorov's book and assessing the moral and ethical issues Todorov raises, a few of Zaretsky's comments are misleading. I would like to address them here.

Todorov does not claim that his account is not like others because he alone sees the events he describes in shades of grey. He merely states that his perspective is different from hagiographic accounts written by the victors or from "systematic denigrations" by one side or the other. One must assume that professional historians would agree with Todorov here. He certainly is not aiming at all historians of Vichy.

Moreover, Todorov does not ignore, or betray a "blindness" to the work of historians dealing with Vichy over the last 25 years. In his Preface to the English Edition (which Zaretsky does not mention), Todorov does sketch out, albeit briefly, the problems that historians have had dealing with the period and its memory. In fact, Todorov has written admirably on this subject in *Les abus de la mémoire*, *L'homme dépaysé*, and in his essays on the Touvier affair.

Finally, Zaretsky mentions that the omission of Sadrin's journal is "unfortunate", but does not say why. It would be interesting to know what he feels it would have added to Todorov's account.

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*Additional Note from B. Gordon, Co-Editor, H-France:*

Just a footnote to the complexities of dealing with the events of 1944. Most of the Milice leaders, such as Lecussan, had previous Right-wing affiliations. Lecussan had served with Vichy's *Commissariat des Questions Juives*, and prior to that had had connections to the *Cagoule*. Bout de l'An, however, was something of an exception. A history and geography teacher, he had in 1932 been president of the *Ligue d'Action Universitaire Républicaine et Socialiste*. After becoming director of propaganda for the Milice, Bout de l'An was occasionally referred to as the "Goebbels" of the Milice.

He brought to his activities there a 'socialist' past, that though exceptional, was not unique among the Miliciens.

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