
H-France Review Vol. 10 (October 2010), No. 171

Frederic Spotts, *The Shameful Peace. How French Artists and Intellectuals Survived the Nazi Occupation*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2008. 296 pp. \$22.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN-10: 0300163991.

Review by Nicholas Hewitt, University of Nottingham.

In June 1940, the caricaturists Zyg Brunner and Chas Laborde walked down from Montmartre to see for themselves the German occupation of Paris. They returned traumatised, and, as their friend Pierre Mac Orlan recorded later, they were never able to bring themselves to tell what they had seen. Laborde, who, like most Montmartre cultural figures, had fought in the First World War, died in 1942—of cancer and a broken heart.

Silence, of course, was only one of the many possible responses to the German Occupation, and, in this book, Frederic Spotts discusses the strategies which French artists and intellectuals used to survive the period, both physically and morally. These range from the initial *exode* from Paris to the provinces as the German armies advanced, together with the difficult decision of whether to return to Paris, re-group in Vichy or remain in the relative obscurity and safety of the regions. For some, the attraction of Paris was irresistible, for political, professional or social reasons, and the artists and writers who returned there, or more rarely had never left, became highly vulnerable, in some cases willingly, to the blandishments of the German authorities. The Germans regarded control over French cultural activity and production as a means both of restoring a semblance of normality, and, more sinisterly, of undermining French claims for cultural supremacy. This explains the importance of Otto Abetz's cultural initiatives, such as the notorious *Liste Otto* which engineered voluntary self censorship on the part of the Parisian publishers in a process that, incidentally, included the enthusiastic takeover by these very same Parisian publishers of the Jewish firms of Calmann-Lévy and Nathan. It also explains the role of the Director of the German Institute, Karl Epting, and that of the literary censor Gerhardt Heller. Although Heller was rumoured to favour the unreconstructed elements of the pre-War *Nouvelle Revue Française*, albeit, as Spotts rightly points out, largely on his own testimony, the German Institute became the focal point for artists, writers, journalists and actors, who were willing to do business with the Germans. They ranged from the ideologically and politically committed producers of *Je Suis partout* or *La Gerbe* to socialites and actors who were more interested in the lavish receptions. The Germans also swamped Paris and, to a lesser extent, provincial towns with lavish imports of exhibitions, concerts and opera.

One option, of course, was to avoid being sucked into the ambiguities of cultural life in Paris by remaining in the provinces or, more drastically, but, for the politically and racially undesirable, more imperatively, seeking exile overseas. In this respect, Spotts provides an excellent summary of the role of Marseille as a point of departure for South America, as in the cases of Bernanos or Lévi-Strauss, or the United States, with the Surrealists, Jules Romains and Saint-John Perse, who, incidentally, was, as Head of the Quai d'Orsay, more important than Spotts gives him credit for and at some considerable political risk. Marseille also functioned as an autonomous cultural capital, and

Spotts offers a welcome and rare tribute to the founding editor of *Les Cahiers du Sud*, Jean Ballard, who not merely kept the flame of an independent French, and Mediterranean, culture alight, but also ensured the safety and freedom of countless cultural refugees, including many from Germany. We are also reminded of the importance of the provincial poetry and literary reviews, like Pierre Seghers' *Poésie* series, which specialised in a "littérature de contrebande", embedding subversive themes in a literary format which would deceive the censor. Not, incidentally, that the Vichy censor constituted that much of a threat: after publishing an unusually explicit pro-Resistance poem, Seghers merely received a letter from the censor warning him that any recurrence would lead to a suspension of the review for one issue. Other examples include René Tavernier's review *Confluences*, published in Lyon, a city which could have benefitted from an analysis comparable to that of Marseille, as well as the better-known clandestine publications *Les Lettres Françaises* and *Les Editions de Minuit*.

A more extreme form of "internal exile" was that constituted by a refusal to publish anything during the Occupation that was subject to Vichy or German censorship. Gide remained silent in the relative security of Nice, before prudently moving to Tunisia, whilst his fellow *niçois* André Malraux published *La Lutte avec l'Ange* in Switzerland. The most famous example is that of Jean Guéhenno, who published nothing between 1940 and 1944 and devoted himself to his teaching and to his diary, *Journal des années noires*. Similarly, the anarchist editor of *Le Crapouillot*, Jean Galtier-Boissière, suspended publication during the Occupation and, like Guéhenno, concentrated on his diaries, published only after the Liberation. Incidentally, welcome as it is to see Galtier-Boissière receive an all-too rare mark of recognition, it is incorrect to describe him, as Spotts does, as philo-Semitic. *Le Crapouillot* published a quite savage special number entitled *Les Juifs* in the 1930s and *Mon Journal pendant l'Occupation* retails a number of anti-Jewish jokes, such as the rumour that Jewish deportees in Drancy bribed their guards to transmit their transactions to the Bourse. As Walter Benjamin had long complained, there was a strong current of left-wing anti-Semitism in France in the interwar years.

The problem was, in some sense, more extreme in the plastic and performing arts and Spotts provides a useful, if somewhat limited, overview of the role of theatre and cinema during the Occupation. Clearly, the performing arts differ from the creative ones in one crucial respect: a writer, or painter, can still produce work, if only for personal satisfaction and subsequent distribution, whereas an actor or director needs an audience for their work to exist and for their professional capital to still be recognised. Hence, the willingness of many film actors and film directors to work on German-funded projects, notably those under the aegis of Continental Films, and the continuing health of theatre during the "années noires." Spotts' view of the quality of Occupation theatre is perhaps unduly pessimistic about a four-year period which saw, amongst others, two great Giraudoux plays, Montherlant's *La Reine morte*, Anouilh's *Antigone*, Sartre's *Huis-Clos* and *Les Mouches* and Camus' *Le Malentendu*. Such a run stands up not too badly by any comparison, and to dismiss Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin* as a "work of ineffable tedium" flies in the face of French theatre history which sees the play as one of the twentieth century's greatest dramas.

More useful is the author's discussion of French music during the Occupation, which notes the pronounced pro-German sympathies of the pianists Alfred Cortot and Lucienne Desforges, the obsequious collaboration of Serge Lifar, and the accommodation with the new regime by Arthur Honegger, although this did not prevent him from later collaborating with Camus on the original performance of *Etat de siège* in 1948. The performance arts also became subject to the most overt German pressure in the form of lavish imports of German works and highly publicised cultural visits to the Reich. The position of sculpture and painting, however, was more variegated. There was, of course, the well-known exhibition of Arnold Breker's work, feting the sculptor as a paragon of Nazi art, and the notably pro-Collaborationist stance for the former Fauves Derain and Vlaminck, but most artists retreated into the private space occupied by many of the writers: Picasso and Matisse kept their heads down, in spite of the former's strong left-wing credentials, but whether this justifies their being labelled as "artful dodgers" is debateable. In any case, it would have been interesting to

follow the careers of more of the practitioners of the “Ecole de Paris” before and after the First World War, such as Braque or Dufy.

This raises one of the major problems of this book. It may be, as Spotts claims, the only study to provide an overview of all aspects of artistic, intellectual and literary activity during the Occupation, but, as such, it appeals essentially to a general public. Hence the absence of footnotes and a comprehensive bibliography which are replaced instead by notes at the end of each chapter on major works consulted; Spotts also necessarily uses a broad brush which all-too often does not accommodate detail or nuance. It is a good story and reasonably well-told, but it is constructed from a restricted number of case-studies which do not and cannot explore the wealth of evidence deployed by the specialist works on individual aspects of cultural and intellectual history which Spotts uses. This leads inevitably to a certain schematisation which is not sufficient to explain the events. The somewhat glib and cosy references, for example, to “the Left Bank Crowd” and the “Saint-Germain-des-Près Set” rely on an overly simplistic cultural topography of Paris which is basically inaccurate. The Left Bank was not overwhelmingly, or even perhaps predominantly, left-wing, for it was the centre of the University and also important sectors of the Catholic Church, whilst the Ecole Normale Supérieure inclined undoubtedly to the Left even though Brasillach was one of its graduates, much of it was the heartland of Action Française and other radical right-wing groupings. The Boulevard Saint-Michel was, after all, the scene of Léon Blum’s close brush with assassination in early 1936 when his car blundered into groups of Action Française militants following the funeral cortege of the historian Jacques Bainville and the Quartier Latin was where Bernanos, an arts student at the Sorbonne, cut his radical teeth as a Camelot du Roi. In the post-war period, and even today, the Law Faculty at Assas was a bastion of extreme right-wing opinion and militancy. Nor was Saint-Germain-des-Près uniformly peopled by Bohemian leftists and liberals: the Cafés de Flore and des Deux Magots may well have catered, but by no means exclusively, to a liberal intellectual clientele, but opposite them, on the other side of the Boulevard Saint-Germain, the Brasserie Lipp was home to the radical Right, again a tradition which persisted well into the post-war era.

This leads Spotts to characterise his cast in terms which are little more than labels, centred on the word “collabo”, and which really do not do justice to the complexities of the subject. “Collabo” was a term of abuse, mainly verbal, though sometimes enshrined in graffiti, and was meant to cover as broad a target as possible: from people who engaged in trade with the Occupier, who frequented them socially, to those who worked actively and consciously for the Nazi cause. In between were Vichy and a whole level of engagement with Pétain’s Etat Français and the governments of Laval and, more briefly, Darlan. This covers a multitude of sins and time-frames, from the socialites who enjoyed the hospitality of Abetz and the German cultural organisations in Paris, which did not necessarily signal any particular political commitment to the Nazis, to those who, like the *Je suis partout* team, worked consistently for the New Europe, on to those who saw Vichy as the best short-term pragmatic solution to France’s problems, De Gaulle notwithstanding.

At the same time, the chronology was crucial: it was possible to be on the anti-Republican Right in the 1930s, and yet rally to the opposition once France was defeated. The Spanish Civil War was often a catalyst, as in the cases of Bernanos and Mauriac; Action Française, after the initial “divine surprise” of Pétain’s coming to power in 1940, allowed its anti-German sentiments to outweigh its anti-Republicanism and became a powerful force in the early Resistance: witness the Royalist Lieutenant Estienne d’Orves, one of its first martyrs. Later, the leader of the Croix de Feu, Colonel de la Roque, joined the dissidents and died at the hands of the Gestapo. All of which goes to say that there was a huge difference between political positions and behaviour in the 1930s, the understandable resignation of the majority of the French in 1940 and 1941, and radical re-alignment after Barbarossa in 1941, with the creation of PCF resistance movements, the German declaration of war on the U.S. following Pearl Harbor, the Allied invasion of North Africa in late 1942 and the subsequent occupation of the “Zone Libre”, and the impending opening of the Second Front. To be a “collabo” in 1940-1941 was understandable, if not admirable; to be one in 1943 and, especially after Stalingrad, meant something very different. Brasillach himself recognised that, which is why he jumped ship from *Je suis partout* in early 1944, leaving his colleagues to proclaim, even at the height

of the Allied invasion, “Nous ne sommes pas des dégonflés!” In this book, the chronology and the terminology are often confused, with terms like “collabo” “arch-collabo”, “Nazi supporter” being rendered almost meaningless by lack of precision and when the terms are being applied.

The same lack of focus applies to the definition of “culture”, almost, but not quite, exclusively used in terms of high culture. There is reference to music hall and popular cinema, but not enough to make a significant impact. The great stars of the Parisian music hall did indeed continue to perform for exclusively German audiences, with their privileged French guests, and did tour in Germany, but there is no mention of a continuing fervour for American popular culture (Hollywood films were shown in the Southern Zone until Pearl Harbour), including jazz in its widest forms: orchestras with explicitly-derived American names toured France’s major cities throughout the Occupation and Django Reinhardt, who, as a Gitane, was eligible for deportation to the death-camps, was allowed to go on tour in occupied Belgium. Jazz became a focus for unofficial anti-Nazi resistance amongst European youth, which the Reich was powerless to stifle in Germany and which in France was embodied in the phenomenon of the *Zazous*. It is not sufficient, by the way, even in a popular history of the period, to state that the history of music in the provinces is “a story that has never been told and is now lost in the mists of time”: this is lazy writing and very lazy history, and the details of provincial performances are not lost at all but present in the work of local historians, the Departmental archives and the entertainment listings in the provincial press.

The problem with broad-brush histories is that they often stifle the story altogether, and much of this book relies on the “dog who didn’t bark in the night” syndrome: we follow Cocteau, for example, at great length through his assiduous socialising with the German authorities, only to conclude that he did not really do that much that was reprehensible. All he did was survive, as did most of the protagonists. That, in itself, is a useful contribution: as Henry Rousso has calculated, until early 1944 probably 90 percent of the French population were relatively neutral, with only 10 percent as committed Collaborators or active Resistants. The mass of the population, with notable exceptions, such as the railway workers or other trade-unionists on the Left or volunteers for the Milice or the LVF, be they artists, intellectuals or humble white-collar workers, kept their heads down and tried to eke out their daily existence in increasingly harsh conditions, not helped by the Allied bombing of major cities. In this respect, the case of *Je suis partout* or *La Gerbe* is useful: there is a distinction to be made between those who wrote for these, and similar, newspapers and those who published work in them, such as short stories or extracts from forthcoming novels. The latter may have been guilty of misjudgement and even dubious political sense, but that did not make them Collaborators: as professional writers, they were earning a living from the only way they knew how and through the only sources available to them.

The ambiguity extends further: as Spotts quite rightly points out, there is an apparent paradox in Camus’ undoubted heroism in the Combat Resistance movement and his publication of *L’Etranger* with Gallimard under the rules of the Liste Otto, as there was between Sartre’s membership of the CNE and his consumption of huge amounts of strictly rationed paper for *L’Être et le néant*, not to mention Aragon’s role as a Communist Resistant and his fidelity to the openly Collaborationist Denoel. The paradox becomes even more complicated in the case of Guéhenno, whose principled decision to publish nothing during the Occupation coincides with his continuing occupation of his Chair at the Lycée Henri IV (he was never sacked, by the way, but merely demoted), effectively working for the “arch-collabo” Abel Bonnard, Vichy Minister of Education. The choices were stark: destitution, exile or starvation or some form of participation in the Nazi-imposed regime, and most opted for survival.

It is for this reason that the Epuration was such a damp squib: few writers and artists actually fell seriously foul of the Occupation authorities and those that did were either Jewish, like Max Jacob or Robert Desnos, or Communist militants like Jacques Decour, the founder of *Les Lettres Françaises*. The Epuration certainly targeted a number of artistic personalities, particularly Sacha Guitry, Pierre Fresnay, Danielle Darrieux or Arletty (it is a shame that Spotts does not quote her riposte to her accusers that she had a German lover: “Mon coeur est français mais mon cul est international”), but this was largely the result of a popular desire for vengeance against high-profile celebrities who

were perceived to have lived in luxury whilst the rest of the population were starving. The professional Listes Noires were progressively revised down and, as Spotts rightly points out, had minimal effect, except in the area of film where the life expectancy of a star is notoriously short anyway. Brasillach was misguided in handing himself in as early as November 1944, when feelings were running high and when the legal framework could only use the law on “Intelligence avec l’ennemi”, introduced in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War and used to some effect in trials of collaborators in the Northern territories in 1914-1918. As it happened and *pace* Alice Kaplan, Brasillach’s record as editor of *Je suis partout*, which was German-funded, did explicitly support the Nazi cause, and did indeed denounce individual Jews in Paris whilst calling for the extermination of them and their children, could well have justified a death sentence, even though, arrested later, his former colleagues Laubreaux, Cousteau and Rebatet, had theirs commuted. In fact, the major victims of the Epuración were not so much intellectuals as press barons like Jean Luchaire (Spotts could have pointed out that the actress Corinne Luchaire was his daughter) or pro-Nazi publicists and broadcasters like Paul Chack.

This is an important story and the general reader will gain a useful insight into French artistic life during the Occupation and the Epuración. It is not clear, however, that scholars of the period will come across much that is not already in the published domain. It is a shame that the book did not benefit from more careful editorial advice, which might have taken out some of the more colloquial terminology, and, indeed, more stringent copy-editing (at one moment the occupation of the Free Zone is dated at early 1942, which it certainly was not, and then rectified on the following page by its correct date later that year) and proof-reading (“Henri” de Montherlant is in fact “Henry”, and Arletty is sometimes spelt as “Arletti”).

Nicholas Hewitt
University of Nottingham
nick.hewitt@nottingham.ac.uk

Copyright © 2010 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 edistribution/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.