
H-France Review Vol. 13 (Month 2013), No. 152

Peter Mangold, *Britain and the Defeated French. From Occupation to Liberation, 1940-1944*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2012. xviii + 312 pp. \$37.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN-10: 1848854315.

Review by Jay Winter, Yale University.

This is a book about Churchill and de Gaulle and their tempestuous alliance against Nazi Germany during the Second World War. It is told with a degree of detachment from both sides, as is fitting for a distinguished former correspondent of the BBC World Service. The major contribution of this work is in describing and highlighting the significance of the BBC French Service in providing reliable news during the war and for bolstering the position of *France Libre* as the voice of defiance and resistance to which the French at home turned during the four years separating defeat from liberation. One of these radio broadcasters, René Cassin, chose to ask his wife to put into his casket the text of his 1940 BBC broadcast on the anniversary of the Battle of the Marne. For those who had to endure Vichy and the Nazis, the voice of men like Cassin, a leader of the veterans' organization *L'Union Fédérale*, made a difference. It kept alive the idea that resistance was possible, even that small act of resistance which was embodied by turning on the radio and tuning in to the French service of the BBC.

Aside from this insight, this book adds little to what we already know about *France Libre* and its leader. The centerpiece of this study is the story of the personal and mercurial encounters between de Gaulle and Churchill during the war. What could have made it richer is a comparison between how Britain (and Churchill in particular) treated Free France in exile and how she treated the other exile governments in London. The exiled leaders of Norway, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Belgium and the Netherlands all had the advantages of being recognized governments. De Gaulle had no such standing. He was a man without a country, in the sense of being without a popular mandate and outside the political elite of the nation, and his struggle for recognition was something other exiles could avoid. The Polish case is perhaps the most tragic of all, in that Churchill had to consider Stalin's demands after 1941 as more important than Polish demands. In April 1943, just after he had demanded an investigation into the Katyn massacres, General Władysław Sikorski, the head of the Polish government in exile, was killed (almost certainly murdered). But even those like Beneš who did go home found British assistance to be of little help in stopping a communist takeover in 1948.

A more fully European story would have better set in high relief the treatment of de Gaulle and *France Libre*. In later years, de Gaulle did find that Churchill's tilt to the United States during the war made it difficult for him to believe that Britain's membership in the European Community was anything other than a Trojan horse, but the story of de Gaulle's hostility to Britain needs to be set in the context of the treatment of all exile communities in London; they were pawns, and paid for in part by the British Treasury; valuable pawns to be sure, but pawns nonetheless. Britain was their home of necessity, but the dominance of both the United States and the USSR in the defeat of Nazi Germany meant that wartime solidarity between and Britain and all exiles in London was quickly forgotten when either catering to the wishes of FDR or Stalin became the central matter at hand.

The other side of the story of Britain and *France Libre* which is still to be told is how miserable it was to be exiled and under the Blitz in London in 1940-1941. Without family, friends, most without the English language, exiles knew that they were on death lists should the Nazis succeed in invading Britain. While defiance was inevitable, its sequels were frequently depression and sometimes despair. Even a notorious optimist like René Cassin found it hard to write his scripts for the BBC French Service broadcasts when the bad news came, such as the disaster in Greece in 1941. His wife was prone to giving up hope, and there were many more people like her than like her husband in the exile community.

After all, you would have had to be clairvoyant to believe without doubts in Allied victory in 1941, 1942, or even in 1943. Given how near a thing the Normandy landings were, almost scuppered by the worst weather in the century, one could even have imagined a popular surge for negotiations had the operation failed; remember that Eisenhower left a famous message stating that if it did fail, the responsibility for that failure was his and his alone. Brave and honorable words; ones we should not forget, not only because of their dignity, but also because of their realism. With the Red Army moving westward and taking whatever casualties were necessary to push the Nazis back, there were those who had no wish to see a communist Europe replace a Nazi Europe. Had Normandy failed, who knows what would have happened?

Recognizing how grim London was during the war helps us understand better the emotional history of London's exile community during the war. During the Blitz, René Cassin fell in love with the woman he ultimately married thirty-five years later. The desperate situation of 1940-1941 put exiles—and not only exiles—in a strange and vulnerable position. What is more human and understandable under such circumstances than finding emotional companionship, licit or illicit at the time? The famous chipper stoicism of Londoners under the Blitz was an attitude perfectly consistent with long-standing patterns of deference and of putting up with conditions which other populations might not have accepted. Anyone who has waited in a train in Britain halted in a field without a word as to why or when things might get better knows what I mean. As Peter Cook put it in the 1960 satirical comedy revue, *Beyond the Fringe*, responding to every disaster with an injunction to put on the kettle for a nice cup of tea didn't translate into French (or Czech or Polish for that matter). The history of London life during the war, including the lives of thousands of foreign exiles, is still to be written. Mangold's political history touches lightly on this story, but someone still needs to explore the human price exiles paid as exiles during the Nazi occupation of their countries.

A second major theme developed in this book is the evolution of both Britain and France as imperial powers. The collision over Syria is told well by Mangold, but the meaning of the war for the post-war unraveling of the imperial moment in both countries' histories needs further attention. We hear a great deal about the tortuous history of de Gaulle's dual with Giraud, but not enough about what the war did to either de Gaulle's or Churchill's approaches to empire. Churchill, after all, was a diehard imperialist in the 1930s, and his attitude to Gandhi was at certain times shockingly condescending and racist. De Gaulle had to deal with the early moments of the Vietnamese war of independence before he resigned in 1946. Did the war heighten their sense that empire was vital for their countries' future or that the days of imperial grandeur were over?

There is more to be learned as well about the post-war relationship between the two giants at the centre of Mangold's story. Churchill, voted out of office in 1945, became the greatest European of them all, the vital inspiration at the heart of the Hague congress of May 1948, and the movement to create a Council of Europe and both a European Convention of Human Rights and a Court to enforce it. He was the guiding light of the largely conservative group that saw the European project as a bulwark against communism. How did de Gaulle take to this European turn in his old adversary's life, admittedly short-lived though it was? When Churchill returned to power in 1951 he dropped the European card and never picked it up again. Then there was Suez, when Churchill was in retirement but de Gaulle was

emphatically not. What do we know of their views on the botched renewal of the Anglo-French alliance? Perhaps we need to await Julian Jackson's biography of de Gaulle to know more about all these matters, but there is an aftermath to the story Mangold tells which is of more than passing significance and forms part of the history of the retreat from empire both nations were forced to endure.

It would be churlish to end on a negative note in reviewing a book that takes great pains to show that the politics of the wartime alliance in London was intricate and fractious. Mangold does help us understand why Churchill is said to have believed that the heaviest cross he had to bear was the Cross of Lorraine (General Spears actually said it), and he brings to life the extraordinarily centralized nature of wartime politics. Without Churchill and without de Gaulle, who knows if the Allies would have won the war? In 1940, both men defied logic and military accounting and refused to accept defeat. All of us are indebted to them for their bloody-mindedness and their backbone. This book is a fine survey of both, and if it leads to a greater exploration of the world of exiles during the Second World War, it will have more than served its purpose.

Jay Winter
Yale University
Jay.winter@Yale.edu

Copyright © 2013 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.

ISSN 1553-9172