

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 13 (June 2013), No. 74

Debbie Lackerstein, *National Regeneration in Vichy France: Ideas and Policies, 1930-1944*. Farnham, U.K. and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012. 267 pp. \$124.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-6721-6.

Review by Kenneth Mouré, University of Alberta.

The Vichy regime's aspirations for its National Revolution were immense, imprecise, and impractical: a defeated France would be reborn as a unified, dynamic player in the new Europe created by German conquest. That Vichy failed to accomplish this national regeneration while occupied and exploited in a Europe at war is hardly surprising. How it failed, and how its agenda, ideas and personnel carried developments from the late Third Republic and continued in the Fourth remains a field for debate and new research. There is now a rich literature considering the continuities and ruptures in politics and policy from the interwar years to Vichy and on to the Fourth Republic. Vichy brought non-conformists and critics from the political margins into positions of temporary influence. Recent work has established many continuities, in the politics of the non-conformists and the right,[1] the policies of racial exclusion and eugenics,[2] economic planning,[3] including the French corporatist initiatives,[4] and in family policy[5] and cultural policy.[6]

*National Regeneration in Vichy France* explores Vichy rhetoric and policy by focusing on the language that dominated right-wing critiques of the Third Republic and the agenda of the new French state. Debbie Lackerstein analyzes the use of five catchwords: decadence, order, action, realism, and the new man, examining them for the meanings and power of attraction they held in the 1930s, and their continued use after June 1940 to influence and to criticize Vichy policies. These words captured the ideals and aspirations of writers from diverse groups of non-conformists and right-wing critics, but they provided no "coherent philosophical position or systematic ideology" (p. 9). They carried an "emotional charge" (p. 9) useful to mobilize support and call for change, but they provided no basis for a clear, practical program, and gave a misleading impression of unity, coherence and purpose to Vichy policy objectives.

"Decadence" leads the catchword queue as the preferred term to describe the loss of energy, purpose and direction in interwar France, which critics saw as weakened by liberalism, parliamentary politics, materialism and Marxism. Its antithesis, "order," would restore the hierarchy, balance and cohesion needed in the social order and in politics. Philippe Pétain as head of state in 1940 promised France "a regime adapted to its climate and genius" (p. 80), a phrase as hopeful and empty as his actual program. On both catchwords, Lackerstein emphasizes the divisions and the hollowness the words concealed, and their superficiality in any effort to deal with real social, economic and political problems.

"Action" would replace the political and spiritual torpor of the Third Republic, replicating the dynamism of Fascism and Nazism, in order to re-energize France for an active, significant role in a Nazi-dominated Europe. Any action to this end, however, required German approval and therefore favored collaborative action by Vichy and drew its strongest advocates from the collaborationists in Paris, who wanted more action and energy than the octogenarian Pétain and his New Order could provide. As Vichy's

collaboration offered ever-poorer prospects for French renewal, the increasing activity of the Resistance offered an alternative path for those who really wanted action for national objectives. Vichy's "action" was to be complemented by "realism," which would focus policy on a return to the soil and a return to the hearth, traditional social units, to rebuild national values and social order, with an emphasis on work and rural life, the family and a restoration of moral behavior. Vichy's agenda for "realism" proved powerless against the everyday realities of shortages, economic exploitation and political vassalage, and their impact on public opinion and support for Vichy. Action and realism needed some better purpose than a return to tradition in a defeated France.

Finally, the "new man" would replace the decadent and corrupted shirker of the Third Republic with a new figure set apart by his energy, physical fitness, moral probity and political solidity. Attention to the education and training of youth would cast this future new man in a new mold. The place for women would be distinctly subordinate, based on their reproductive role in the context of improving French racial stock and providing a traditional and conservative nurturing environment for their many children. In reality, defeat, occupation and scarcity meant traditional families were fractured and schools lacked teachers and resources. The environment for youth under Vichy produced a greater "moral crisis" than had the Third Republic and a surge in juvenile delinquency.[7]

The focus on catchwords as "the language of regeneration" (p. 8) provides insight into the differences, contradictions and confusions among the critics of the Third Republic. Lackerstein emphasizes the incoherence and inconsistencies, concluding that the catchwords were "too vague to form a policy and too amorphous to constitute an ideology" (p. 233). She covers an impressive range of published materials, from the press to pamphlets, books and speeches. In capturing the vocabulary and tenor of public debate, she observes commonalities across political divides with close attention to the logic and intent of the authors. But this provides focus on ideas much more than policy, to which her subtitle promises attention.

Policy and power are critical to the translation of ideas into political programs and government. Lackerstein begins with an analytical chapter on "The Realities of Power under Occupation," and she repeatedly notes that Vichy's agenda was only made possible by the French defeat. Policymakers assumed they would have autonomy and liberty to decide policy for rebuilding a strong French state, and Vichy's survival depended on a German victory. Given that "ultimately, the war determined everything" (p. 235), it is not clear what difference the catchwords made in Vichy's actual policies and its paltry record of accomplishments. Whether ill-formed ideas might have been translated more successfully into effective policy under better circumstances depended on many factors beyond coherence in their journalistic formulations. The competing factions and the shifting configurations of Vichy insiders, critics seeking power and influence among the hangers-on in Vichy and the collaborationists in Paris, receive attention for their catchwords rather than for their politics.

The policy dimension, the Vichy impulse to create new committees to develop policy initiatives, and how politics complicated policy formulation and implementation, receive little attention. The regime was supposed to reject the Third Republic's reliance on intellectuals and abstract ideas in order to draw on the knowledge and experience of practical men to direct real change. Greater attention to how and why the practical men failed could provide a fuller analysis of Vichy policy and a clearer assessment of whether the inconsistent meanings of the catchwords contributed to the consistency of Vichy policy failures. Andrew Shennan has argued that the differences and conflicts between National Revolution advocates tended to stimulate new ideas, and that just as defeat and occupation had created the opportunity for a National Revolution, they ultimately sealed its fate. "Far from being an ideology of pragmatism, the National Revolution proved to be an ideology undone by pragmatism." [8]

The strength of *National Regeneration* lies in its close attention to the rhetoric of renewal. Lackerstein is convincing on the ideological incoherence of the ideas behind the National Revolution, and the five

catchwords she studies mark clearly Vichy's failures to act on the critical vocabulary of the 1930s. Decrying decadence had a long tradition as a critique with only negative content. The positive catchwords—order, action, realism and the creation of a new man—remained empty rhetoric in a regime that was too often looking backward in its desire to start anew.

## NOTES

[1] Olivier Dard, *Le rendez-vous manqué des relèves des années 30* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002); Paul Mazgaj, *Imagining Fascism: The Cultural Politics of the French Young Right* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007); and Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization: Factory, Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

[2] Gérard Noiriel, *Les origines républicaines de Vichy* (Paris: Hachette, 1999); Vicki Caron, *L'Asile incertain: La crise des réfugiés juif en France 1933-1942* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008, an updated version of her *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942* [Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998]); Paul-André Rosenthal, *L'intelligence démographique: Sciences et politiques des populations en France (1930-1960)* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2003); and Andrés Horacio Reggiani, *God's Eugenicist: Alexis Carrel and the Sociobiology of Decline* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

[3] Richard F. Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Michel Margairaz, *L'État, les finances et l'économie: Histoire d'une conversion, 1932-1952* (Paris: CHEFF, 1991).

[4] Steven L. Kaplan and Philippe Minard, eds., *La France, malade du corporatisme? XVIIIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Belin, 2004).

[5] Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Christophe Capuano, *Vichy et la famille: Réalités et faux-semblants d'une politique publique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

[6] On economic planning as well as cultural policy, Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[7] Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for Children: World War II, Youth Crime and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[8] Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France: Plans for Renewal 1940-1946* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 27.

Kenneth Mouré  
University of Alberta  
[moure@ualberta.ca](mailto:moure@ualberta.ca)

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