
H-France Review Vol. 18 (August 2018), No. 181

Manuel Bragança and Fransiska Louwagie, eds., *Ego-histories of France and the Second World War: Writing Vichy*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xvii + 333 pp. Figures and index. \$99.99 (hb). ISBN 978-3-319-70859-1.

Review by Shannon L. Fogg, Missouri University of Science and Technology.

It seems like a book review of ego-histories written by scholars of World War II France should begin with the reviewer's own brief ego-history. Like many of the authors included in the collection, my introduction to Vichy-era France began by chance. Walking across the campus of Texas A&M University as a college sophomore, I was handed a sheet of paper advertising the Normandy Scholars Program. It offered twenty-five students the opportunity to take four classes together in College Station, and then spend a month in France at the end of the semester. I was fortunate enough to be selected to participate, and that semester and the travel abroad completely changed my career path. I changed my major from biology to history, did a senior thesis on Marguerite Duras's *The War* (under the supervision of Joe Golsan), and eventually went to graduate school, writing a dissertation on daily life in France during the war. I had no prior connections to France, but I happened to be studying during the 1990s, a "watershed moment for anyone interested in Vichy and its memory" (p. 212). The authors of the essays published in *Ego-histories of France and the Second World War* were actively researching and writing during that period and recount their own "slow and erratic stumble towards the discovery of a subject and an appropriate methodology" (p. 127). My own career path has crossed with many of the scholars in this book in ways that my twenty-year-old self could never have imagined.

This collection of intellectual autobiographies, resulting from a workshop held in Belfast in 2015, focuses on the professional trajectories of fourteen senior scholars who have devoted a significant portion of their careers to studying France and the Second World War. Based in five different countries and representing various academic disciplines, these scholars share the academic paths that led them to their topics and discuss the genre of ego-history, the evolution of scholarly work on World War II, and the importance of relationships in research (see the list of contributors and their essays below.) Drawing inspiration and theoretical background from Pierre Nora's 1987 work *Essais d'ego-histoire*, the editors explain that "this book...aims to investigate, highlight and clarify how specific inquiries and insights have evolved and unfolded in all their complexity, showing the various ways in which history, memories, cultural representations and (inter)disciplinary perspectives have encountered and located 'Vichy' since the ... memory turn of the 1970s" (p. 14).

The volume is organized geographically, grouping together essays by scholars in France, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere (including the United States, Australia, and Israel.) Within each section there are essays from historians, literary scholars, and those interested in film and cultural studies (and discussions of connections between the various fields.) It is bookended by an introduction and conclusion written by the editors that serve as useful references for the reader. The introduction provides context for the project, the historical period, and the theoretical background while the conclusion attempts to draw connections between the individual stories and the collective history of World War II. There is also an interview with Robert Paxton, who having already published an ego-history and as a major icon in the field, provides a brief overview of some of the major questions that appear in the individual contributions.

There is no overarching argument in the volume as the editors deliberately chose not to give the authors a prescriptive set of instructions. As a result, each author approaches his or her ego-history differently, but common themes emerge. Nearly all the entries reference Nora's earlier collection of ego-histories and the importance of Robert Paxton's book *Vichy France* on shaping research. Many also point to Henry Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome* as key in thinking about how the Second World War has been remembered. [1] Resistance and Collaboration appear regularly in the entries as do the theoretical changes in the field of literary criticism, history, and memory studies. Many note the social and political movements of the late 1960s and 1970s as important in shaping their interests and perspectives. All the essays discuss the origins of the writer's research interests, many grapple with questions of identity (religious, national, cultural, and familial), and several point to the tension between history/literature and lived experiences. Many had close relatives with direct ties to the events they study, adding another dimension to the research.

An issue that the scholars engage with fairly regularly is identity. For some of the writers, family histories or political commitment shaped the topics they chose, clearly seeing a link between their identity and their work. Renée Poznanski begins her ego-history by discussing the "ghost of the *Shoah*" that had "decimated our entire family and shaped our everyday lives" (p. 267) and notes, "[t]he almost tangible link between my personal trajectory and the collective history of a people developed my Jewishness" (p. 268). Colin Nettelbeck writes, "My father died when I was three, as a result of wounds received during the 1941 Syrian campaign against the Vichy French"—"a need for understanding [his death] ... has motivated pretty much all my work" (p. 243), although Nettelbeck notes this connection was not always clear to him. Others feel as if an identity was "imposed" upon them. Henry Rousso notes that the question "why are you working on the Vichy period?" carried an implied response: "because you're Jewish" (p. 90) even though Rousso himself felt his interest was motivated more by generational differences than ethnic or religious explanations. Others, such as Peter Tame and Laurent Douzou, have felt that they have, as individuals, been wrongly associated with their research. Tame has been "accused of being a Fascist, of sympathizing with Fascists...by literary critics and of being an apologist for a Fascist collaborator who proved to be a traitor to his country" due to his research on Robert Brasillach (p. 188), while Douzou realized he was associated with Communism despite his anti-Stalinist upbringing because of his research on the Communist Resistance. Richard Golsan was warned that "colleagues would assume my politics were reactionary as well and dismiss my work accordingly" (p. 206) if he chose to study Henry de Montherlant, and Marc Dambre believes his "work on literary history had been sidelined because it was generally considered as reactionary" (p. 36).

The editors note the growth in this field of scholarship since these scholars began their work and especially the integration of World War II and the Holocaust in research, but it is also clear that the field remains relatively small. Relationships and connections between the various scholars emerge clearly within their writings. Some note the importance of their dissertation directors while others mention their interactions with each other. As Denis Peschanski notes, “When one talks about oneself, it involves other people also. This implies that intellectual exchanges and personal encounters are important, even crucial, since one never develops in isolation” (p. 68). What is missing, however, in most of the self-examinations is a discussion of the influence these senior scholars have had on subsequent generations of scholars working on the Vichy period. My own career path has been significantly shaped by my interactions with several of the contributors—through their publications but also in the classroom, conferences, workshops, and personal interactions. I know this is true of other mid- and early-career scholars working on World War II. The Belfast conference included exchanges and workshops with junior scholars, but the editors note that they chose to investigate “research perspectives through the prism of a group of senior scholars” (p. 311). While some of the contributors discuss public engagement with the period and how they have helped shape those discussions (especially in France), they do not regularly discuss how they have helped shape future scholarship.

Although the writers allow us a few glimpses into navigating the “work” part of their careers, much more of the focus is on research and publications. This perspective means readers get a good view of the major arguments developed by these scholars as well as the shifting terrain of the field during their careers. The reader does see some of the changes in academia as well. Colin Nettelbeck notes “how easy it was for a young scholar to find work in 1963” (p. 249) while Hilary Footitt discusses her decision to leave “the duties of the busy university management position I then occupied” in order to write the book she had always wanted: “With some trepidation, and against the advice of many colleagues, I took the plunge and resigned my academic post” (p. 135). Others mention the importance of research groups or institutions devoted to research. On a more personal level, almost all the authors engage with their youth in discussing the origins of their interest in the Second World War. Many mention partners or children, but do not usually engage with how changing family circumstances may or may not have influenced their research. Others do. Henry Rouso notes that “living for nearly twenty years with a philosopher and psychoanalyst” influenced his ability to write a philosophy-inspired book (p. 99) and Susan Suleiman directly connects her studies of World War II to her identity as a woman and a mother: “Walking around Budapest with my children, I remembered that I was not only a woman and a mother, but that I had been a young Jewish child in that city during World War II” (p. 289).

What does come across very clearly in the essays is the role of chance in each scholar’s career: chance encounters, unplanned opportunities, or surprise findings in the archives all could change the author’s course. Many came to study the Second World War and the Vichy period in general after first engaging with other eras or other countries. These chances are like history or writing ego-histories: contingent and open to interpretation. With contributors from many different fields and different countries, the book serves as a useful way to engage with issues such as methodology, international and inter-disciplinary comparisons, and the development of a field of study. While the focus is on the Second World War, there is much to consider for people interested in the genre of ego-history, in literature, in film, historical memory, and in history more broadly. The authors often discuss the works that influenced them and each essay has a bibliography that would be useful for a readings course on France and World War II. In the end, the editors have gathered a collection of intellectual histories that demonstrate that “the

understanding of the history and memories of the Second World War in France cannot be grasped through a single and unifying narrative: on the contrary, taken together, they advocate that it is only through a multiplicity of perspectives that the complexity of this period and its long-lasting impact on French society can be apprehended" (p. 307).

LIST OF ESSAYS

Manuel Bragança and Fransiska Louwagie, "Introduction: Ego-histories, France and the Second World War."

Robert O. Paxton, Manuel Bragança and Fransiska Louwagie, "Interview with Robert O. Paxton, on the Writing of History and Ego-History."

Voices from France

Marc Dambre, "Currents and Counter-Currents."

Laurent Douzou, "Resisting Fragments."

Denis Peschanski, "On Chance and Necessity."

Henry Rousso, "From a Foreign Country."

Voices Across the Channel

Margaret K. Attack, "In the Forests of the Night: England, France and the Writing of War."

Hilary Footitt, "Searching for 'Contact Zones' in France's War."

Robert Gildea, "A Tale of Two Frances and a Curious Ancestor."

Christopher Lloyd, "Vichy, Kingdom of Shadows."

Peter Tame, "Writers in Conflict."

Voices from Far and Near

Richard J. Golsan, "Good Fortune, Good Friends."

Bertram M. Gordon, "The Other Side: Investigating the Collaborationists in World War II France."

Colin Nettelbeck, "When Faced with the Question."

Renée Poznanski, "Born in Paris...."

Susan R. Suleiman, "Reaching Vichy via Budapest: On Zigzags, Waves and Triangles in Intellectual Life."

Manuel Bragança and Fransiska Louwagie, "Conclusion: Cross-Perspectives on Ego-history."

NOTES

[1]. Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Knopf, 1972) and Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

Shannon L. Fogg
Missouri University of Science and Technology
sfogg@mst.edu

Copyright © 2018 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 redistribution/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