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Maurice Rajsfus, *Operation Yellow Star* and *Black Thursday: The Round-up of July 16, 1942*. Trans. by Phyllis Aranoff and Mike Mitchell. Los Angeles: Doppelhouse Press, 2017. xv + 276 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-99781840-6; \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-9970034-9-9.

Review by Patrick Fournier, University of Ottawa.

In June 1940, while the French army desperately tried to fight the onslaught of the German Wehrmacht, members of the French government were driven into fierce political debate to determine the future of France in the face of total collapse. While some favored capitulation and the opportunity to flee to North Africa where a government in exile would allow the French state to regroup and honor the treaties signed with its allies, a strong coalition of politicians preferred to explore the opportunities offered by signing an armistice with Germany to spare the expected brutality of a full-scale Nazi rule. Led by the popular and charismatic Marshal Philippe Pétain, the new French government was then faced with a particularly difficult situation: deal with the challenges of a German occupation and, insofar as relations with the Nazis allowed it, eventually find solutions to the deep and crippling national issues diagnosed by certain members of the French political right and various intellectuals during the 1930s. But in the short term, the real challenge remained the conditions of the armistice signed on June 22, 1940, especially the consequences of article three, which essentially put the French administration at the disposal of the German authorities in the occupied zone, thus allowing them to rely on the French to implement its regulations and limit the involvement of German resources.

In the months that followed, the German authorities exploited this arrangement and introduced various regulations as they worked toward maintaining order and establishing their rule over the occupied zone. In this context, the Nazis—and the French, for that matter—identified certain segments of the population as “enemies” such as “Gaullists,” Communists, and, of course, Jews. Indeed, starting in the fall of 1940, the latter became the target of an ever increasing and restrictive number of laws and decrees adopted by the Nazis and the French alike, a series of regulations that culminated in May 1942 with the Eighth German Order against Jews that imposed the mandatory wearing of the yellow star in the occupied zone, followed by the mass arrest and deportation of foreign Jews the following month.

In these two books, published together, former activist and investigative journalist Maurice Rajsfus sets out to explore these two closely interrelated events. Approached separately and differently—the first based on an analysis of archival documents to explain the context of the introduction of the yellow star; the second acting more like a reminiscence of the events that led to his arrest at the age of fourteen during the vast police operation targeting Parisian Jews in July 1942 and the steps he took as a journalist to find out and understand what had happened—they remain inseparably bound by their themes since the introduction of the yellow star was essentially a prerequisite to the deportation of Jews in Nazi occupied Europe.

In *Operation Yellow Star*, Rajsfus revisits the escalation of French and German anti-Jewish regulations between the fall of 1940 and the publication on May 29, 1942 of the Eighth German Order introducing the mandatory wearing of the yellow star for all Jews aged six and up in the occupied zone. Through

various archival documents from the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine and the Préfecture de Police de Paris, the author paints broad strokes of this evolution by focusing on the various actors, especially the Parisian police which was largely complicit in doing the Germans' bidding in applying their anti-Jewish regulations.

It is important to note that despite the use of historical documents, the author is not a professional historian. While several primary sources are used throughout the study, Rajsfus does not properly review them, thus limiting their strength in supporting his arguments. This limitation is most notable with regard to the documents from the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris. Readers should be reminded that these are police documents written while the organization was actively collaborating with the Nazis. Also, access to various sensitive archives from the Occupation, including those of the Parisian police, was facilitated in 2015, but it is unclear if the author benefited from those newly available documents.

While the overview of the evolution of anti-Jewish regulations in the occupied zone is adequate, the book cannot be recognized as an in-depth analysis of what led to the adoption of the Eighth German order. The author shares some insights into the negotiations over the introduction of the yellow star in the Dutch, Belgian, and French occupied territories by reprinting a few German documents, but it would have been more interesting to get a better glimpse of the complex negotiations over the issue between the German military, the embassy, and the leaders of the Gestapo whose priorities and concerns over the introduction of an order that had the potential to rattle public opinion did not necessarily coincide with those of Theodor Dannecker, head of the office of Jewish affairs at the Gestapo and chief architect of this project in France. Nevertheless, Rajsfus' overview of what led to the preparations and application of the order remains engaging as the author alternates between German and French police documents to discuss concerns over the support of the French police. This section, incidentally, contradicts the general impression conveyed in previous chapters that Parisian policemen had had few qualms enforcing the Nazis' anti-Semitic regulations.

Rajsfus then proceeds to discuss the consequences of the order, such as the search for non-compliant Jews. He explores several intriguing subjects that have generally been overlooked by the historiography or, at the very least, confined to a few paragraphs, namely the requests for special dispensations by Jews and the various protests of non-Jews over the humiliating measure, as well as the role of the press in supporting the anti-Jewish regulations in general. These analyses, however, still suffer from a lack of contextualization and source review, and most of the press clippings are not cited.

Surprisingly, the author then jumps ahead to the Liberation, reflecting on the Parisian police's accountability for their role in the implementation of the German order, which makes even more obvious his glaring omission of Jewish reaction toward the yellow star. This is a questionable choice as a number of diaries have been published on the subject, notably the diary of Hélène Berr, a young Parisian student, and Jacques Biélinky, a journalist of Russian origin residing in Paris.^[1]

In his concluding chapters, the author's antipathy and disdain towards the French police remains apparent. For example, he notes that before Paris was liberated, "the hunt for Jews [went] on, as vicious as ever, and the wearers of the star continue to be stopped for questioning for any and every reason, as if wearing the 'special badge' were a misdemeanor, whereas in fact it is an obligation" (p. 100). Come liberation, "the rank and file of the Paris police are not particularly worried, and they found it difficult to change their way of thinking" (p. 106). Rajsfus hints that, in a certain way, the police's action during the liberation of Paris in August 1944 helped them redeem themselves in the public eye and allowed most policemen to escape punishment. As he explains later, "there is always a strong temptation to resort to anathema [sic] when dealing with this period in which the policemen of France were nothing more than adjuncts to the Gestapo operating in French uniform" (p. 110). The truth of the matter is, however, much more nuanced and complex than what the author is saying. A more in-depth contextual analysis would have explained that the French policemen's zeal was more often aimed at foreign Jews, a behavior

that is not necessarily only attributable to Nazi pressure but also based, as Gérard Noiriel explains in his effort to highlight the continuity between the Third Republic and Vichy, on the traditional responsibilities of the Parisian police to assert its control over foreigners before the war.[2]

In the second book, *Black Thursday*, Rajsfus focuses on the mass roundup of foreign Jews in Paris that was conducted by the French police on July 16 and 17, 1942. On these days, the author and his family were arrested in the early morning and escorted to a gathering point. He and his sister were released, but the rest of his family was moved to Drancy and then to Auschwitz where they perished.

The second volume, therefore, is structurally and thematically different from the first. Rather than using historical documents to study the event, the author relates his own arrest and the details as he remembers them. He also punctuates his narration with personal insights and anecdotes about his childhood growing up in Vincennes as he and his family were led from their apartment and through the neighborhood to the collecting point. This recollection, combined with the historical knowledge acquired through his own research, helps recreate not only the atmosphere of those infamous days, but also the life of a Jewish boy growing up in the suburbs of Paris in the 1930s and early 1940s. This approach succeeds at conveying the various emotions felt by the victims and helps emphasize the abrupt transition between the relative normalcy of the first two years of the Occupation and the collapse of the author's world at the age of fourteen.

Through his own experience as a victim as well as a journalist, Rajsfus explores different themes associated with the event. For instance, he discusses the tragedy of being arrested by a policeman known by his family and is by extension extremely critical of the zeal and arrogance of the policemen who legitimized their actions because they were "following orders." His criticism extends to concierges as he recounts visiting his apartment after his release only to find their concierge rummaging through the rooms, trying to break into a locked buffet. The author also explores such emotions as the sense of expectancy and anticipation of the event, dismissed as rumors and the difficulty of preparing for such a thing, the feelings of despair once he was arrested and faced with an unknown fate, and his inability to recognize the danger as he strolled in a stupor through the neighborhood amid the operation. He also addresses the issue of bystanders, their indifference and curiosity, which provides an excellent summary of the general atmosphere of the day.

In the second part, the author offers further insights on the situation after the fact. The author recounts the steps he took to learn more about the event, notably his efforts to confront the policeman who had arrested him and his family—only to be greeted by "not interested" as a response—and the drivers who drove the busses during the roundup. The exercise constitutes an interesting view into the field of investigative journalism as we follow the author's steps to find more information at the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris and exposes the reluctance of the French police to come to terms with its own past. He also emphasizes the various problems faced by researchers studying the era in terms of access to archival material. This investigation touches on numerous issues of memory such as the role of bystanders and their apparent indifference, not only at the time of the events, but also as a memory of shameful collaboration and what Rajsfus refers to as "local amnesia" (p. 192).

Rajsfus' effort inserts itself in a particularly extensive historical literature that attempts to understand how a state like France, home of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, could become complicit with the Nazis and relentlessly chased Jews to resolve the so-called "French Jewish problem." It is an interesting addition to the number of studies on collaboration and especially the role played by the French police in the persecution of those identified as "enemies of the state," and while it is not very thorough in terms of historical method, the book remains an excellent overview of two interconnected topics and is filled with various interesting insights and opinions.

NOTES

[1] Hélène Berr, *Journal of Hélène Berr* (New York: Weinstein Books, 2008); Jacques Biélinky, *Journal, 1940-1942: un journaliste juif à Paris sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Cerf, 1992). The author does refer to Biélinky's journal twice to report a demonstration of solidarity of non-Jews toward the new victims of the German order, but not to show the Jewish reaction on which Biélinky reflects on numerous occasions.

[2] Gérard Noiriel, *Les Origines Républicaines de Vichy* (Paris: Hachette, 1999).

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