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Thomas R. Christofferson with Michael S. Christofferson, *France during World War II: from Defeat to Liberation*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. xiv + 254 pp. Map, notes, index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8232-2562-3; \$24.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8232-2563-1.

Review by Nicole Dombrowski Risser, Towson University.

Returning to France in 1938 from the Munich Conference, Edouard Daladier called the crowds that cheerfully greeted him, "blind fools," and said, "This is only a respite, and if we don't make use of it, we will all be shot" (p. 17). Daladier could not have understood in 1938 the accuracy of his prophecy. By war's end, 600,000 French men and women had lost their lives, of which only 210,000, including 40,000 Alsatian and Lorrainer conscripts into the German army, had suffered that loss in combat operations, narrowly defined (p. 199). Indeed "to be shot," in the sense Daladier intended, as meaning to be held accountable for the failure of public and private leadership, resulted in 791 civilian executions and 769 military executions at the end of the process of hammering out French wartime justice. From the invasion through to the Liberation, France slid into a period of domestic violence unlike anything experienced since the Revolution. The physical destruction to the country even exceeded the devastation of World War I.[1]

Thomas R. Christofferson's synthetic analysis of these crucial years in modern French history, as well as of the scholarship through which three generations of postwar historians have chronicled that experience, offers general and specialized readers alike a well-packed narrative of the years of violence and despair that marked France during the international and domestic debacle of World War II.[2] Indeed, the tight packaging of this smoothly flowing, protagonist-driven narrative is at once a mark of the book's main achievement and its deftly masked weakness. The organization of the book into six chronologically arranged chapters sets up the themes and timeline of the war, making the book a nice selection for any undergraduate or non-specialized graduate course on modern France or the war. The reduction of each chapter title to a single phrase or word signals also the choice to avoid engaging in deep historiographical debates and to motor through the story of the war years. The chapters include: "Defeat of France," "National Revolution," "Collaboration," "Exclusion," "Resistance," and "Liberation," with a preface and an epilogue. Michael S. Christofferson, according to the preface, "...researched and wrote a few additions to the text," including, "...the Epilogue's paragraphs on contemporary France" (p. xiv). The Epilogue comments on the war's legacy and postulates that France has now put Vichy behind herself. The conclusion expresses faith that the Republic has little to fear from Le Pen or the street violence of 2005-2006, an interpretation of present-day politics which may spark debate among many contemporary France-watchers and citizens of the hexagon.

Specialized researchers will no doubt be frustrated by the leveling of historical controversy on an array of charged topics upon which the book touches, but they should also respect the broad digestion of fifty years of scholarship on the war and the authors' particular skill for sorting out and highlighting some of the period's most notable, but forgotten, actors and events, like the Maquis' battle against the Wehrmacht in the Hautes-Alpes on the plateau of Glières in February and March of 1944 (p. 172), that are frequently lost in recent American histories of the war. In this way, the book is important to the field which, despite having generated monumental synthetic works, including Julian Jackson's *The Dark Years*, Philippe Burrin's *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise* and the two volume study of Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *Les Français de l'an 40*, has for the last generation produced

needed, but narrowly focused, micro-studies of the war. Professional historians as well as lay readers benefit from the appearance of an occasional, swiftly-scripted, broadly-scoped story, but such works perhaps too easily produce the kind of claims advanced by the Christoffersons that, “the divisive debate on Vichy has reached a point of exhaustion, maybe even a conclusion of sorts” (p. i).

An achieved goal of this narrative is to deliver an untarnished and triumphant conclusion to France’s struggle to survive defeat and occupation. France was neither a nation of collaborators nor resisters, the authors concur. Instead, institutions failed while a sum of good, well-intentioned citizens did the best they could to survive. The authors do manage to achieve credibility for this line of reasoning by identifying France’s principal morally and politically compromising practices during the war, occupation and liberation. However, French deficiencies are limited to a clear cast of villains, Vichy officials and enthusiasts. The authors emphasize and largely forgive the ambiguous choices heroes, such as the various arms of the Resistance, confronted. Judiciously they expose Charles De Gaulle’s strengths and limitations. Surprisingly, Georges Bidault, the Christian Democratic politician and the head of the National Council of the Resistance, emerges as the most celebrated, but lightly sketched protagonist of the Resistance period.

Bidault’s triumph as a war hero knots a thread of interest laced gingerly throughout the book that draws selectively upon the work of W. D. Halls.^[3] One application of this narrative line implies a wartime reconfiguration of the core values of French Christianity which sprang from a Christian grassroots resistance to claim a proud role alongside the more widely hailed communist resistance. The book insists upon the recognition of the achievements of Catholic idealists such as Hubert Beuve-Méry, founder of *Le Monde*, Emmanuel Mounier, (the “Christian Bolshevik”) director of *Esprit* and Jean-Marie Domenach, his successor, to counter the failings of the institutionalized Church and to pave a foundation for the postwar rehabilitation of Christianity in the aftermath of Vichy’s exploitation of traditional religious values. The authors dance around the history of the church as an ice fisherman tiptoes on thawing ice, hoping not to fall in and be consumed by the freezing waters, but to catch the fish and fry it too. The book instructs contemporary readers that the controversial Uriage School, initially conceived by Vichy as a fountain of future leaders, did ultimately join Henri Frenay’s National Liberation Movement and, in October of 1942, “accepted a manifesto that rejected racism, embraced the equality of all men, emphasized liberty as the basis of spiritually, and called for a communitarian solution to the age’s spiritual crisis” (p. 146).

The specific discussion of Christian resistance does provide a needed minor adjustment to a postwar resistance historiography that, in placing a justified focus on communist grassroots resistance, often casts shadows on important Christian-based resistance activities led by the likes of Edmund Michelet and less celebrated local groups. The Christoffersons want to distinguish the work of Father Chaillet and numerous figures of the Catholic leftist Resistance from the now admitted complicity of the institutionalized Catholic Church which extended active support to Vichy and remained quiet about the Holocaust. But the story of Protestant and Catholic grassroots resistance is an awkward one to disentangle and the authors draw almost exclusively from Henri Frenay’s own memoir. It would have been more useful to clearly outline the lines of debate and the interpretive problems that remain for understanding the French Christian response to the panoply of moral, spiritual, civic and legal issues posed by the war, occupation, anti-Semitism, deportation and anti-Bolshevism.^[4]

The Christoffersons treat intellectuals and Christian activists within a broader category of clerics and argue in the chapter “Resistance” that “In a sense, the Resistance was an intellectual movement.” Here, one suspects, but cannot know definitely, that the work of Michael S. Christofferson exercises notable influence. In a strong defense of Sartre that leaves the book’s allegiances firmly and proudly exposed, the chapter interprets that, “Without doubt, Jean-Paul Sartre’s play, *The Flies*, which attacked the German occupation before hundreds if not thousands of theatergoers, was a cultural high point in the Parisian intellectual Resistance” (p. 162). The text thus leaves unearthed questions about the price

Sartre agreed to pay in order to have the censors approve this performance. The authors admit to Sartre's "moral shortcomings," but then quote his 1944 essay, "La République du silence," and its controversial invective, "We have never been so free as under German occupation," as evidence that "More than anyone else, Sartre captured the existential moment that the vast majority of French people had experienced, either firsthand or indirectly, during these dismal years...." (p. 163). How self-serving and even wide-of-the-mark Sartre's statement must have seemed to literary exiles like Antoine de Saint Exupéry or Lion Feuchtwanger who were prohibited from publishing their work in France, or to refugee writers like Walter Benjamin and Charlotte Solomon who were consumed by the horror of their "liberating unfreedom" along with so many other prisoners and refugees in French and German camps.[5] As an ambiguity-free foil to Sartre's case, the authors draw upon Alice Kaplan's work and present Robert Brasillach as the epitome of intellectual collaboration and political and moral expediency.[6]

The book attempts to provide an even-handed interpretation of what could reasonably be expected of individuals in a period which produced harshly uneven consequences. The narrative creates an image of a stable majority, positioned between expressions of extreme resistance or extreme collaboration. The Christoffersons do not so much embrace "ambiguity" as their much referenced colleague Philippe Burrin has established. They tell the story of a "just middle" forced to make "choices"—a concept earlier advanced by John Sweets and extended to the experience of women by Hanna Diamond.[7] It seems however, certain episodes in the war render this interpretive perspective persuasive, and others require a stronger measure of historical judgment. From this vantage point, the chapters "Exclusion" and "Liberation" are the most successful in applying the concept of choices. The chapter on exclusion states, "Clearly there is no neat moral tale to tell about the exclusion of Jews in wartime France. There were heroes and villains, rescuers and denouncers" (p. 123).

But drawing largely upon the unfortunately not yet translated work of Denis Peschanski and the published work of Susan Zuccotti, the book sketches out the array of scenarios of exclusion, persecution, and rescue and, although revealing nothing new to French language readers, summarize the wide range of scholarship on exclusion, making it a centerpiece of the narrative about the war.[8] On the internment camp question, the historiographical debate is considered. The authors firmly reject the historical relativist approach that has argued that French camps were different and therefore "not as bad" as the German camps. But, in the end, that difference mattered in many ways and, while as many as 600,000 people were interned for some time in France during the war, "less than one fourth of them ended up in Nazi camps" (p. 130). The reader is reminded that the majority of these excluded persons were French and foreign Jews, Gypsies, Freemasons, and members of the Resistance. What distinguishes this book from the case studies regrettably is that we lose the historical details that distinguished how each of these groups fared differently over the course of a worsening occupation and then a violent liberation. However, the experience of those excluded is now front and center in a popularly accessible narrative built largely upon the most recent research in France by one of its most distinguished scholars, Denis Peschanski.

The book and the war end in a crescendo with France's liberation from Nazi occupation and Vichy authoritarianism. During this episode, heroes appear in no short supply, as do villains. But for the general reading public, as well as non-period specialists removed by age from the war, the recounting of the stunning twists of plans and acts of deceit by all parties make this chapter a stand alone piece for any introduction to the Allied arrival and the German retreat, placing the French firmly in command of their own domestic and international political resurrection. On January 3, 1945 (the text says 1944), General DeGaulle, repatriated to French soil, argued with General Eisenhower that it would be a "national disaster" if the Allies pulled out of Alsace to continue the chase into Germany.

A pivotal moment thus occurred when DeGaulle convinced Eisenhower to allow General de Lattre to defend Strasbourg and then to move out to "carve out a sphere of influence in southwestern Germany"

(p. 182). On March 4, 1945, General de Lattre led French troops across the Rhine River and established command in the Black Forest-Baden-Wurttemberg sector, seizing Stuttgart before the Americans arrived (p. 182). The action occurred nine years to the week after Hitler had marched into the Rhineland announcing German re-militarization and thus greasing the gears for the war. (Was DeGaulle aware of the historic timing of this move?) A few months earlier on September 6, 1944, Marshal Pétain, in an act of desperation, approved the creation of the *Délégation gouvernementale française pour la défense des intérêts français en Allemagne* as an organizing tool to use from his asylum in Sigmaringen to “restore peace” and combat the Anglo-Saxon invasion. No grander contrast between hero and villain could have been scripted in fiction.

The battle for Stuttgart, and not the Liberation of Paris, was De Gaulle’s true genius and earned him a seat at the Berlin table and as a consequence the rehabilitation of France in post-war world affairs. As for Pétain, the flight to Sigmaringen, like Louis Capet’s flight to Varennes, earned him a treason trial and a death sentence. Proof that post-war French justice was not a replay of the Terror, the authors argue, is that DeGaulle, unlike the Dantons of the Revolution, commuted Pétain’s sentence and granted mercy to a traitor who had done much to earn his noose. In the end, Daladier’s prophecy came true for hundreds of French men and a few French women, but not for the Hero of Verdun.

In an effort to salvage useable lessons from this dark past, generation upon generation of historians will repeatedly reconsider the heroes and villains of the time in order to mint a fresh story for a drifting audience. But as soon as that work is done, as it has been accomplished in this book, a new wave of historians will undoubtedly continue to dissect the moral and political anatomy of these World War II archetypes whose achievements and failures were indeed the fodder for an atrocious war. As the pendulum of interpretation continues to swing, the Christoffersons’ belief that the debate on Vichy is closed and that, “This history is over...” is as likely to prove true as Francis Fukuyama’s claim in the 1990s that history itself was over (p. xiv). The presentation, as well as omission of evidence, in *France during World War II* strongly suggests that historians of Vichy still have plenty of work, particularly as they weave the various yarns of that history into a more complicated understanding of Vichy’s impact on France’s rebirth in the postwar era.

NOTES

[1] Christoffersons, p. 195. The authors use Henry Rousso’s statistics from *Vichy L’événement, la mémoire, l’histoire* (Paris:Gallimard, 2001), p. 562 and Peter Novick, *The Resistance versus Vichy: The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

[2] For the purposes of this review, I shall generally refer to the author as Thomas Christofferson except when, as stated in the preface, Michael Christofferson is the author of noted subsections. The preface of the book states that “This book is primarily the intellectual property of Thomas R. Christofferson, but Michael S. Christofferson has been given some authorial credit in reflection of his *significant* [italics mine] contribution to it,” (p. xiv). The authorial concept of “with” is one less frequently seen in historical academic writings than in trade publications. I believe Michael S. Christofferson, based on his description of his contributions, might have more accurately been listed as the editor of the text. However, the preface suggests that he had perhaps greater influence in shaping interpretive arguments in the book than would a text editor.

For the purpose of this review, I may refer to the book’s authors in the plural based again upon the preface’s statement that, “In consultation with Thomas, Michael checked facts and revised the

manuscript to reduce its size [my emphasis], improve clarity, and address issues of fact and interpretation [my emphasis] raised by Robert O. Paxton," (p. xiv). I wish to clarify for the reader that I have assumed that both authors agreed to the interpretations presented in the work, a few of which I take issue with in this review. I have tried to be as accurate as the preface will allow in attributing authorship to Thomas R. Christofferson and Michael S. Christofferson, when separately indicated. However, given the nature of the revision process it is impossible to sort out exactly which interpretations formed part of Thomas R. Christofferson's original manuscript and which resulted from queries answered in Michael S. Christofferson's revised final manuscript produced in consultation with his father.

[3] W. D. Halls, *Politics, Society and Christianity in Vichy France* (Oxford: Berg, 1995).

[4] Henri Frenay, *The Night Will End*, trans. Dan Hofstadter (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976). No page number cited. In their discussion of the difference between a Protestant culture of resistance and a Catholic culture of conformity a dangerous form of essentialism emerges. They may have strengthened this section by including some of the arguments advanced by Robert Zaretsky in *Nîmes at War: Religion, Politics and Public Opinion in the Gard, 1938-1944* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) and in the memoirs of Edmond Michelet, *Rue de la Liberté: Dachau, 1943-1945* (Genève: Éditions Famot, 1975).

[5] Both Saint-Exupéry and Lion Feuchtwanger continued their publishing careers in the United States during the war. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry published his deeply conflicted manifesto to resist, *Flight to Arras*, trans., Lewis Galantière (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942). Vichy allowed *Flight to Arras* to sell about 3,000 copies in France and then suppressed the book once its popularity became an issue of concern. Unlike Sartre, Saint-Exupéry actually lost his life fighting for France while flying a reconnaissance mission on the eve of the Allied invasion. As a Jewish exile intellectual escaped from France, Lion Feuchtwanger had no choice but to publish his resistance manifesto from abroad. Feuchtwanger's *Simone* invoked the Joan of Arc legend in order to inspire the French to raise arms against the Germans. See: Lion Feuchtwanger, *Simone*, trans., G. A. Hermann (New York: Viking Press, 1944).

[6] For a different point of view on Jean-Paul Sartre's resistance credentials read Tony Judt, *Un passé imparfait: les intellectuels en France: 1944-1956* (Paris: Fayard, 1992). For the full account of the Brasillach affair see Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). The discussion of intellectual resistance offers an example of a larger problem manifest throughout this text and perhaps inherent in grand syntheses: The narrative and notes risk being stripped of valuable details. Interpretive discussions about very charged topics, still entangled in heated historical debates, appear distilled of their complexities. This is a problem faced by many academic historians now pitted in a conflict with publishing companies who are increasingly determined to reduce the length of manuscripts, simplify historical analysis for a broader reading audience and maximize profits, if any are to be gained from the field of history. The preface hints at this issue, stating that Michael S. Christofferson had to, "...revise[d] the manuscript to reduce its size, improve clarity, and address issues of fact and interpretation raised by Robert O. Paxton," (p. xiv). While we can not know what priorities the press and authors made in reducing the manuscript's size, the book might be further improved by the inclusion of more detail about key individuals and events, as well as a full airing of the scholarly interpretive debates on important issues such as; anti-bolshevism, wartime communism; the role of the Catholic Church during the war and in the war's aftermath and on resistance. This would have been helpful since the preface suggests that a goal of this book is to offer an "interpretation" that slightly deviates from the mainstream, (p. xiv). However, the book is not clear enough about which sets of interpretation on Vichy it specifically wishes to revise or amend.

[7] John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France, 1939-1948: Choices and Constraints* (London:

Longman, 1999).

[8] Denis Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-44: contrôle et exclusion* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1997) and *La France des camps: l'internement, 1938-1946* (Paris: Gaillmard, 2002). See also Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, The French, and The Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). Zuccotti has also written further on the Vatican's complicity in the maintenance of silence around the Holocaust.

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