



**Richard Vinen.** *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 496 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-12132-2.



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## Confusion, Coercion, and Community: Ordinary People and the Occupation of France

Richard Vinen's *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation* contributes to the historical literature of the occupation by emphasizing the flip sides of standard academic accounts (p. 5). Inspired more by non-professional than academic French historians, Vinen's book is an engaging narrative of ordinary French people's experiences of the occupation. Rather than challenging other scholars' contributions to the historiography, he provides a different angle on the period that uses a wide range of individuals' experiences to nuance our common understanding of the occupation years. The topics covered range from prisoners of war and labor conscription to French women's interactions with Germans, as well as black marketeering, the exodus, and the fate of the Jews in France.

Vinen primarily emphasizes the social history of the occupation, and he seeks to unravel what French people themselves expressed during these dark years (p. 5). Therefore, he privileges memoir and fictional accounts as sources, which he acknowledges introduces a host of interpretive problems. Vinen debates whether he

should believe individuals who are not always able to say whether the striking stories that [they] tell about the occupation are true or not (p. 8). His entire narrative turns on this methodological problem, and Vinen succeeds admirably in demonstrating the uncertainty of the occupation years as experienced by the French.

At times, the experiences of Vinen's ordinary people could be interrogated more systematically. Vinen, for instance, relates the stories of three Vichy officials who seriously considered joining [Charles] de Gaulle in London but elected instead to remain and serve Henri Philippe Petain until joining the resistance in late 1942 and early 1943. Vinen uses these cases to illustrate how diverse the servants of the (Vichy) regime were, which supports his view that simply working for Vichy was not a sufficient condition for being a collaborator (p. 59). While Vinen persuasively demonstrates the diversity of officials' motives in serving the Vichy regime, readers will likely remain curious about why these individuals made these decisions. Readers may accept that Vichy provided a huge job market in the summer of 1940, but

they may bristle at his later suggestion that the Milice, a French police force that helped the German deport Jews and others, were driven primarily by material motives (p. 125). Vinen explicitly denies any intention of justify[ing] or apologiz[ing] for the Vichy government, but his narrative comes dangerously close to minimizing the important ideological aspects of the occupation years.[1]

Despite his claim to the contrary, Vinen defends Vichy on one controversial point: Vichy's policy towards the Jews. His assertion that Vichy legislation was not driven by the same logic as German measures since Vichy sought to exclude Jews and not to kill them contradicts other scholars' accounts of the period, in particular Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton's work *Vichy France and the Jews* (1995), which argues the converse (p. 136). Vinen highlights the ambiguities of ordinary French people's perceptions of the Jews; however, such cases do not support his assertion regarding the different logic of Vichy's anti-Semitic legislation.

Vinen's most compelling discussion is of the vulnerable population who experienced the constant threat of violence as well as social pressures to conform to Vichy directives (p. 132). He agrees with Roderick Kedward that Vichy policy targeted the most expendable groups in society, a lumpenproletariat, including unemployed workers, foreigners, women, and criminals (p. 118).[2] Vinen excels in highlighting the extent to which socially marginal individuals were vulnerable to coercive policies emanating from the various ruling powers, and to society, which coerced them as much as state authorities. The Service Travail Obligatoire serves as one example of this process in which older community members reproached young men who evaded labor service. These men relied on community support to successfully avoid labor service, so social disapprobation powerfully compelled young men to volunteer for work in Germany.

Vinen interprets French women's interactions with Germans in a similar way, as he stresses the extent to which "lower-class" women and "underprivileged" women were vulnerable to coercion and sexual oppression from Germans as well as to being "badly treated by their communities" (pp. 179-180). Moreover, the entire occupation of France was often understood in "sexual terms" and French women's behavior was closely scrutinized, especially women whose jobs required their daily contact with German men (p. 158). For both young men and young women, their community's scrutiny and their social status shaped their experiences of the occupation

as well as their susceptibility to coercion.

Vinen's examination of the French in Germany, a group that originally included only prisoners of war, but expanded to include labor "volunteers" (male and female) as well as forced laborers and transformed POWs, illustrates how boundaries between volunteers and press-ganged workers, or between soldiers and civilians, became increasingly porous (pp. 281-282). For instance, those who "volunteered" eventually became forced laborers as their contracts were violated, and prisoners of war, when "transformed" into workers, lost the protections of the Geneva Convention. This social ambiguity and uncertainty added to ordinary people's confusion as they were forced to take on unprecedented roles to survive. The black market further exacerbated this process by creating grey zones between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, as everyone in France practiced it to some extent, and almost everyone in France condemned it (p. 224).

Throughout the book, Vinen cites economic survival and other banal motives as causal factors to explain why French people acted the way they did. Aspiring to validate historical attention to issues such as food supply as opposed to politics narrowly defined (p. 4), Vinen's narrative succeeds. However, the book purposely avoids the thorniest issue of the occupation years: assigning responsibility for criminal and inhuman acts.[3] *Unfree French* is a rich and diverse account of ordinary people's perceptions of the war years in France. Vinen's emphasis on the vulnerability and confusion of the French during the occupation, supported by his use of anecdote and eyewitness accounts, adds texture to the existing literature on this volatile era.

#### Notes

[1]. See Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), which details the ideological underpinnings of the Vichy regime.

[2]. Roderick Kedward, "The Maquis and the Culture of the Outlaw," in *Vichy France and the Resistance: Culture and Ideology*, ed. Roderick Kedward and Roger Austin (London: Croom Helm, Ltd., 1985), and *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[3]. See Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard, New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972), which provides the original historical indictment of the Vichy regime's criminality.

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